

WORDS MATTER

Promoting dialogue rooted in diverse contexts that continually explores language as a life-giving tool.

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WORDS MATTER is a project of
**THE JUSTICE FOR WOMEN
WORKING GROUP**

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The topic of Inclusive and Expansive Language has been part of the work of the Justice for Women Working Group (J4WWG)¹ of the National Council of the Churches of Christ, USA (NCC)² for many years. In the fall of 2009, Loey Powell, chair of the Expansive Language Working Group committee, and an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ, summed up the process like this: “Sensitivity to gender inclusive language, particularly religious language and metaphor, emerged in the 1970’s with the advent of feminist theology and feminist biblical exegesis and hermeneutics. Many denominations began the process of developing gender inclusive worship materials, protocols for publications, and even biblical translations that offered metaphors and names for God that reflected this inclusivity. The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible was authorized by the National Council of Churches (NCC) which provided inclusive language for humanity but not for God. Some inclusive language hymnals were also produced in subsequent years.

“In recent years, many of us have noticed that there is a decline in the use of gender inclusive language throughout our denominations. Furthermore, new awarenesses have emerged from other communities within our churches about language that reinforces harmful stereotypes about persons with disabilities and persons of color; heightening sensitivity to the use of words in general – words that can create or disrupt community and wholeness. Biblical imagery of light and dark, for instance, tend to associate all that is good with white and light, and all that is bad with black and darkness, reinforcing racist stereotypes. The use of “blindness” to designate not just the ability to see or not see with one’s eyes but seeing or not seeing in a spiritual sense can be offensive to those with physical disabilities.

“The term ‘expansive language’ has been used in some circles to indicate that respectful language that honors all of God’s people is more than just gender inclusive. It also seeks to find words, phrases and images that do not offend or reinforce stereotypes harmful to anyone. As our denominations celebrate being multicultural and multiracial communities of faith, welcoming forms and styles of worship not historically or traditionally associated with our origins, the conversation about the use of language in our churches becomes more critical, and more challenging.”

INTRODUCTION

history of this project

As the discussion began again in 2009, it was immediately clear that language issues were as important as ever to those involved in gender justice work in the churches—but that the conversation must now move deeper, explicitly linking our words to concrete realities of injustice. As church communities consider worship in the context of diverse ethnicities, the ordination of women, sensitivity to Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender members, the able-bodiedness of the people in our pews, and the experiences of young people in an increasingly diverse and interactive world, a call for more expansive language is rising to the surface.

“Issues around the use of language in our churches have been on the agenda of the Justice for Women Working Group for years. Now the opportunity to take this discussion to another level has arrived. I hope there will be many conversations as we continue to explore ways to welcome and value every person who walks through the doors of our churches. The term ‘expansive language’ has been used in some circles to describe respectful language that honors all of God’s people and is more than just “gender inclusive,” says Kim Robey, chair of the NCC Justice for Women Working Group.

As the J4WWG discussed how to move forward with an Inclusive and Expansive Language project, it was clear that a new direction was needed. The group felt that much scholarship had been written, and many denominations have even adopted gender, race, and ability inclusive language policies at governing levels. But most members of the group felt that they did not see the scholarship and policies lived out on a congregational level. We needed to bring the conversation out of academia, out of the high reaches of church government, into the stories of people’s lives.

THE COMMITTEE DEFINED THEIR GOALS AND METHODOLOGY LIKE THIS:

Our Goal is to open a (many) conversation(s) on expansive language through two primary questions:

1. How does our language for God, one another, and our world move us toward God’s justice?
2. What new/other imagery is there to help us connect with God?

WE WILL EXPLORE THESE QUESTIONS BY:

- a. Unmasking the power of language and the part it plays in patriarchy³/kyriarchy⁴, including exploring God-language as a cultural construct,
- b. Emphasizing the effects of language on real, physical lives, connecting our lives and our personal and social realities with God’s justice,
- c. Learning how to have productive dialogue with folks of differing opinions, bringing this sacred conversation to the wider church and the world, and
- d. Lifting up other names or images of the divine which emerge from scripture study, prayer, meditation, or other life experience to express the multiplicity of who God is.

Building off of these goals and methods, the J4WWG organized a conversation held in Chicago in August 2010.

¹In 2010, the Justice For Women Working Group of the NCC celebrates over 38 years of empowering the full participation of women in church and society. Members of the working group include staff and key volunteers from the 36 NCC member denominations who work for gender justice. Networking provides a powerful platform to address both church and society regarding the unique gifts women offer as we share God’s love and justice for the entire world. Providing a Gospel-based analysis that includes an honest assessment of sexism, racism, and classism guides the work of the Justice for Women Working group.

²Since its founding in 1950, the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA has been the leading force for ecumenical cooperation among Christians in the United States. The NCC’s member faith groups — from a wide spectrum of Protestant, Anglican, Orthodox, Evangelical, historic African American and Living Peace churches — include 45 million persons in more than 100,000 local congregations in communities across the nation. Find out more at www.nccusa.org.

³‘Patriarchy’ is commonly understood as the dominance of men over women in a variety of ways relating to differences in power, opportunities, and even the language that is used for people and God.

⁴“Kyriarchy,” a term coined by feminist theologian Elisabeth Schussler-Fiorenza, is used to describe all systems of “lordship” of one person or group of people over and against another, i.e. men over women, white over black, straight over lgbt, able-bodied over differently abled, etc. Schussler-Fiorenza, and the J4WWG, believe these systems of power to be interconnected and deeply entangled with one another, so that one may not speak of discrimination against women without also speaking of racism, heterosexism, etc.

WORKING VISION STATEMENT

Our vision is to Promote dialogue rooted in diverse contexts that continually explores language as a life-giving tool.

This vision is grounded in the Gospel mandate to affirm life and carry forth the healing love of God found within the gospel of Jesus Christ in the face of the death-dealing effects of sin and brokenness in our world.

PROCESS

This gathering approached language issues using a descriptive rather than a prescriptive method—meaning that we did not begin with a list of things that should or should not be said. Rather, all participants came ready to share their own stories as the basis of our work together—describing the impact of language in their lives. We expanded the language conversation, grounding it in relationship and listening to each other's stories of experiencing the power of language and the breaking through of God's healing.

Each person at the August 2010 gathering was asked to respond in no more than 3 minutes to the question:

Share with us an experience when you noticed the power and/or importance of language (words, symbols, or images) and the impact of that language on your life, your faith community, or your relationship with God. This experience may have helped you embrace the Divine more fully or it may have been destructive, harmful, or painful to you in your personal and/or faith journey.

After listening to one another's stories and noting our own responses, we met in small groups to discuss what we had learned from the stories.

august
2010
gathering

WHAT WE LEARNED

The stories we heard called us to expansion—expanding the way we think and talk about ourselves, others, and our God. Instead of restricting language, the stories called for adding more diverse language. The stories called us to expand contextual cultural attentiveness—understanding that language speaks differently in different contexts. They called us to expand our understanding of how language is tied to systems of power and has been and can be harmful, oppressive, and death-dealing. And they showed us that in an environment created through respectful intentional listening, compliance to rules about specific words was not as helpful as commitment to understanding the impact of language. This kind of commitment can lead to real, meaningful analysis of systems of power that oppose the Gospel; extending a life-affirming hospitality within the church and community. Finally, the stories called us to spread this conversation to as many different places as possible.

WHERE WE GO FROM HERE

This manual is designed to be used by small groups in a variety of settings. Local congregations might use it in Bible Studies, new member classes, with confirmation or other youth and young adult groups, or in any number of ways. Staff in a large congregation or within dioceses/synods/or other regional bodies might use it to reenter these conversations in light of new learnings. It could be used in ecumenical gatherings with members from neighboring congregations/houses of worship to learn about each other.



Participants in the August 2010 Words Matter Gathering at the Cenacle Retreat Center in Chicago.

From time eternal human beings have told stories. Generations of families and communities share stories about their common life. Each week in worship we listen to and reflect on “The Story” finding grace and healing for each of us. These stories frame our identity.

The Words Matter project acknowledges the power of story to move us deeper in mutual understanding. At the very least shared stories heighten our awareness of self and others. Carol Howard Merritt reminds us of the importance of narrative, saying “Personal narratives put flesh and bone on historic facts. Stories introduce the ‘other’ by inviting us to enter into the experience of someone else through her imagination. Stories allow the reader to become captivated by the other, to enter the other’s reality. The listener forgets about herself for a moment, until something within her cries out: That’s like me. Then a connection is made, a connection through emotion and empathy.”¹⁵

METHODOLOGY

sharing stories



¹⁵Carol Howard Merritt, *Reframing Hope: Vital Ministry in a New Generation*. (Alban Institute: Herndon VA, 2010), p.68.

Rev. Loey Powell (JCC) shares her ideas in a small group discussion.

FOR ONE SESSION WORKSHOP

(3-4 hours)

Ask people to prepare ahead of time a short story about 3-4 minutes in length, or 300-500 words using the prompt question:

Share with us an experience when you noticed the power and/or importance of language (words, symbols, or images) and the impact of that language on your life, your faith community, or your relationship with God. This experience may have helped you embrace the Divine more fully or it may have been destructive, harmful, or painful to you in your personal and/or faith journey.

- Gathering
- Welcome and opening prayer
- Introductions
- Background of the Words Matter Project
- Group Norms
- Story sharing
- Silence between stories
- Reflect on what was heard
- (Small) group discussion:
 - What did we learn from the stories?
 - Imag(in)ing the Divine
- Vision, Obstacle, Direction Process
- Closing prayer

THE PROCESS:

overview

FOR MULTIPLE SESSIONS

(approximately 5 sessions,
45 – 90 minutes each)

SESSION 1

- Gathering
- Welcome and opening prayer
- Introductions
- Background of the Words Matter Project
- Group Norms
- Share the question
- Listen to an example
- Reflect on what was heard
- Preparing your story
- Closing prayer

SESSION 2

- Welcome and opening prayer
- Review of Group Norms and Expectations
- Sharing stories
(3 minutes each) with Silent break between stories (1 minute)
- Sharing what was heard
(use final 15 minutes of gathering time)
- Closing Prayer

Repeat Session 2 until all the participants have had a chance to share their stories.

SESSIONS 3 AND FOLLOWING

- Welcome and opening prayer
- (Small) group discussion:
- What did we learn from the stories?
- Imag(in)ing the Divine
- Closing Prayer

Repeat this session as many times as needed to explore what was learned from the stories.

LAST SESSIONS: Where do we go from here?

- Welcome and opening prayer
- Vision, Obstacle, Direction Process
- Closing Prayer

Repeat this session as many times as needed to create a vision, name obstacles, and brainstorm directions around those obstacles.

GATHERING

Arrange the room for comfort by placing chairs in a circle. If you like, place a music stand or podium at one point within the circle where people can come forward to read their stories. Next to that stand place a table with the needed equipment for showing video clips. Aim for the setting to be gracious and hospitable. Perhaps light a candle to acknowledge that this is a holy conversation within a sacred circle.

WELCOME AND OPENING PRAYER

Welcome those who have come and thank them for their willingness to have an intentional thoughtful conversation about the words we use to talk about ourselves, other human beings, and God. Offer a prayer that is sensitive to expansive language that welcomes all

INTRODUCTIONS

Invite members of the group to introduce themselves by sharing their name. Ask them to comment briefly on what inspired them to come to the group and what they hope to get out of the conversation. The leader can model this by going first.

“Let’s take a moment to introduce ourselves and comment briefly, just a minute or two, on what inspired you to come to this conversation and what you hope to get out of it. I’ll go first...”

BACKGROUND OF THE WORDS MATTER PROJECT

Referring to the opening pages of this module, offer a brief history of the events that created this conversation. Include any relevant connecting points with your community setting. You may want to ask participants to share their reactions when they hear the terms “inclusive language” and “expansive language.”

GROUP NORMS

Take some time to write on a flip chart or white board some group norms and boundaries for the conversation which will facilitate trust, confidentiality, and comfort.

Consider things like:

- Listen with an open heart, try to place yourself in the shoes of the person sharing
- Listen attentively and in love instead of planning what you will say next
- Speak in “I” terms — “I think”, “I feel”, share from your experience only
- What is said in the room stays in the room, do not share with others outside this gathering, without asking permission from the person you who shared
- Know yourself: extroverts try to hold back a little, introverts try to speak up more!
- Assume good intentions
- If something said is offensive or hurtful to you, say “ouch.” This way the offense is marked and can be explored at that moment or at a later time.
- Allow for a person to “pass” on the timing of sharing their story, but eventually everyone will share a story.
- Other norms relevant to this gathering

Make it clear to the group that if at any time they find that these norms are not meeting their needs they can amend them.

SHARE THE QUESTION

This module will offer both written texts of sample stories and, if possible, video clips of stories shared at the Words Matter conference in Chicago, August 2010. These stories were written using the same prompt question your group will use:

Share with us an experience when you noticed the power and/or importance of language (words, symbols, or images) and the impact of that language on your life, your faith community, or your relationship with God. This experience may have helped you embrace the Divine more fully or it may have been destructive, harmful, or painful to you in your personal and/or faith journey.

LISTEN TO AN EXAMPLE

See Appendix A for transcripts of stories, and visit www.WORDSMATTER.org to view video clips.

REFLECT ON WHAT WAS HEARD

PREPARING YOUR STORY

The following tips on preparing a story are adapted from NPR's *This I Believe*.

- Tell a story: Think of your own experience, work, and family, and tell of the things you know that no one else does. Your story need not be heart-warming or gut-wrenching—it can even be funny—but it should be real. Make sure your story ties to the prompt question.
- Be brief: Aim for three minutes when read or spoken aloud at your natural pace, or about 350-500 words.
- Be authentic: Tell us about your experience with words, language, images or symbols that speak to your experience of yourself, other human beings, and God. Avoid speaking in the editorial “we.” Please avoid preaching or editorializing. Make your story or narrative about you; speak in the first person.
- Be personal: Write in words and phrases that are comfortable for you to speak. We recommend you read your story/narrative aloud to yourself several times, and each time edit it and simplify it until you find the words, tone, and story that truly echo your experience and the way you speak.⁶
- And after our gathering, we would add: Be attentive to the Spirit: Trust that the story God has put on your heart to tell is the right story. Don't be moved, after hearing what others say, to change your story. If you have misgivings about telling your story, listen to the Spirit there as well.

SHARING STORIES (3 minutes each)

Create a system for selecting the next story presenter. This may be a random drawing from a bowl, by the previous reader; or some other process. In the norms allow for people to “pass” once, but eventually everyone will share a story.

Choose a chime or gentle noisemaker to use as a timer when the three minutes for each story is up.

SILENT BREAK BETWEEN STORIES (1 minute)

(continue with 4 minute stories with breaks for silence until 20 minutes remain)

Following each story allow time for the group to sit in silence and reflect on what they heard. Notebooks and pens can be used to journal thoughts and feelings about what was heard.

SHARING WHAT WAS HEARD

Create a process for people to share what was heard at the end of each session of story sharing. This may be by offering flip charts and newsprint for people to write a word or a phrase that stood out for them from the various stories. Then take some time to discuss why the word(s) or phrase(s) were significant.

⁶Adapted from NPR and Edward R. Murrow, “This I Believe” Essay Writing Hints: <http://thisibelieve.org/guidelines/>.

SMALL GROUP CONVERSATION ON WHAT WAS LEARNED

After all the stories have been shared debrief story-telling time with a discussion in small groups of 4 or 5 people, reconvening as a large group to discuss key observation and issues at the end of group time. Consider these, and or other questions, that may have come from the story sharing and the words/phrases that surfaced in the group.

- What did we learn from the stories?
- How did I come to know the language I used to tell my own story?
- How does language connect our lives and physical realities with God's justice?
- What insights have we gained into the cultural construction of God-language?
- How did the stories unmask the power of language and the part it plays in larger structures of power?

IMAG(IN)ING THE DIVINE

- What were some of the new images/metaphors/ideas/stories/descriptions of the divine we have heard today?
- What other images/metaphors/ideas/stories/descriptions were heard?
- Both denominationally accepted and personally important images
- Ethnic and cultural images
- What (or how do) images of God surface in our experience of prayer, etc.?
- Where can we go to find these images?
- How can they be used in worship?

VISION, OBSTACLE, DIRECTION PROCESS

(Make sure all group members read and review the more detailed description of VOD, found in Appendix B)

VISION

This "working vision" has served as the guiding vision of the Words Matter Project:

- Our vision is to promote dialogue rooted in diverse contexts that continually explores language as a life-giving tool.
- Depending on your setting, your vision might be different. Spend some time visioning together as a group.

OBSTACLES

Name the barriers and/or opportunities for your group/community to live into the vision.

Consider these and or other questions your group may have:

- How has our vision concerning Words Matter been lived out so far in our community of faith?
- How has our vision not been lived out (yet)?
- What is keeping our community of faith from paying attention to its language?

DIRECTIONS AROUND, OVER, OR THROUGH THE OBSTACLES

- In what ways might our community of faith move so that we can take on these "barriers?"
- What does our community need to help us approach this issue in ways that are attentive to these obstacles?

APPENDIX A

Sample Stories shared at the
NCC's Words Matter Gathering Aug. 9-11, 2010
see more stories at www.WORDSMATTER.org

Ever since I first had the opportunity to study foreign languages, I have been captivated. I studied as many as I could in school and college and seminary. Friends and family asked if I wanted to travel, or study abroad, but language for me was not about seeing the world—rather it was about seeing my own world differently.

Just before I left for college, my father was diagnosed with a brain tumor and also laid off from work. I saw for maybe the first time in my privileged life how easy it is for illness to take such a toll on any family, and began to realize both my family's privilege and the injustice of so many systems in our society.

Justice, however, was not something people who shared my faith wanted to talk about in my Christian community. Faith was more about believing the right things for the future than it was about concerns for justice in the here and now. At college, I joined a completely secular club focused on social justice, but that just left me feeling fragmented—like a person leading two separate lives.

This was when I began my study of Hebrew. Knowing all my life that this book—the Bible—that I loved so much was originally written in languages other than the ones I was reading it in had always bothered me. “But what does it really say,” I had wanted to know.

But it was not simply in the tenses and participles that was interested, rather it was the sudden complexity created in trying to translate from one language to another, in the necessity of asking questions, and in the vast possibilities that opened. Learning that a word might have several

possible translations, trying to weigh why translators had chosen one over others, often realizing that this or that was a word with no English equivalent, opened up the possibility of God and God's work in this world for me in profound ways.

MEAGAN MANAS

PCUSA
NCC STAFF

Imagine my surprise when I saw in what my tradition had called “the God of the Old Testament,” not fire and brimstone but compassion and care for those outcast by society. I learned that “righteousness” might be better understood as something more like “social solidarity,” and that the word for Eve that had shaped my formation as a young woman, “helpmate,” was used other places in the Bible in reference to God helping God's people—often with military strength.

This newfound freedom was also frustrating. I remember trying to explain the complexities and subtleties of the translation of a certain word to a college roommate who told me she simply did not see how the words she read could mean that. I was so angry at God for giving us a book. “Why did you use words??” was my bewildered prayer.

Words can be so easily misinterpreted, so subjectively defined, so difficult to understand in all their complexity, historical contexts, original languages, and on and on...but over time my frustration has been balanced by the beauty and adventure of God using words to communicate with us. Suddenly faith is not a cut-and-dry dogmatism, but a dynamic place of imagination and hope. In this openness I have found a way to put parts of myself back together, finding the connections between faith and justice and a call to ministry that I might never

When I was four I had a vision, or maybe a dream, depending on how you want to view the memories of a four year old. It was Easter morning and I was sitting in the living room, a pile of candy colored cracked plastic eggs laid out in front of me, sorting jelly beans, my favorite, from chocolate, my un-favorite. Suddenly a figure crossed my living room, a shadow, but made of light. As it crossed the tiny basement apartment an image appeared, floating above the blue shag carpet, Jesus, above my blue shag carpet, well not Jesus, but an image, an icon, pointing toward his sacred heart.

During my freshman year of college I came out to my parents over Christmas break with the words, "I'm seeing someone. His name is Dwight." In my parents minds the words "gay sex" flashed their glaring cultural headlights into their unsuspecting eyes. In a moment their golden child vision of my future was blinded as if I'd screamed the words across the crowded San Antonio restaurant. I never used those words, that word. I refused to use the word "gay" and chose "queer" as an alternative, not that I was "a queer" but rather that "queer" was a place to which I belonged. Gay had been used too violently against me, as a child, as a teenager, as a cultural stereotype. Queer was a remnant of someone else's trauma, someone who suffered for me. It had long been appropriated by a class of thinking, striving, community oriented white academics, who also found gay too narrow. Queer was a movement, a place on the horizon, a place to which not only I belonged, I and those who made similar life choices, but to which all might belong, a place of thinking, lived, unlimited human potential.

**JASON
SIERRA**
TEC

When I began dating a woman four years later, my father came to me with a puzzled look. I had broken his perfect box and now was I asking to be returned? What was I? It was this question of "what" and not "who" or "whose"...

Queer was, for me, a lens, a vision of the body liberated from the normative narratives of heterosexuality and gender differentiation, returning to the primacy of the body, the emotions, the spirit. It represented centeredness not in my social fixedness, but in my very createdness as a source of beauty and revelation. Queer led me back to the cross. An image suspended above my living room floor, vibrating in the pre-rational mind of a four year old.

Like all great ideas, words get copyrighted. Somebody capitalizes the Q or the C and puts an "s" on the end, signifying the insiders and the outsiders. Flags go up and fences go 'round. Christian, a place toward which we orient our lives, becomes a territory we must protect, God, a peak with room enough for only one flag and one altar. I belong fully to Christian, to queer, but I do not own them, I just can't look away.

Take One: We attended and chose St. James because they had two other ministries: one Hmong and one Latino. Things were going pretty well until the Sunday when my 3 year old grandson visited us for worship and asked me who that was over the altar: St. James had a large white – I mean alabaster marble white – Jesus over its altar with the whitest blonde hair and the lightest blue eyes... I was unable to tell my grandson that it was Jesus over the altar. It would have been a lie on so many levels!

I approached the leadership requesting they consider moving the marble white Jesus with the reddish blond hair and blue eyes to the fellowship hall or some other place – I also suggested that I would be an excellent volunteer to spearhead finding other cultural depictions of Jesus of Nazareth so we could show ourselves as a community that truly embraced multi-culturalism. I was told we would have to vote as a congregation.

**INEZ
TORRES
DAVIS**
ELCA

I made my argument. Two days before vote I learned that St. James had adopted the tradition of requiring a unanimous vote for anything to do with the sanctuary. The vote was taken. The snow-white Jesus remains to this day. We left St. James shortly after that vote. Maybe for some, the vote was about race rather than cultural relevance. For some Jesus is the palest white...

O precious is the flow that makes me white as snow; no other fount I know, nothing but the blood of Jesus...

Take two: I have referred to God as both Father and Mother for about thirty years. I started calling Her Mother when I found my own woman strength; it was both liberating and affirming to consider the Motherly aspects of God.

One year I wrote the devotions for one of our publications. It was the May issue and I wrote the Mother's Day devotion. In the prayer, I referred to God as Mother. I received only a few hate emails as a result of that devotion, and I thought it spoke well of those in our organization that I received only a few such emails...

What does it mean that this conversation goes forward? More and more, I think the church struggles to remain relevant. When we argue about such things as a Spirit's gender, we expose ourselves as being dogmatic, limited, and chauvinistic. When we call the European manner of worship and liturgy *traditional* and label anything else as alternative or contextual, we expose our Euro-centrism.

What does it mean to me, personally that we are doing this consultation? It means that others can be liberated, affirmed, and given hope. At least, that is my hope. My prayer..

I am a native of Korea and, to my understanding, my maternal grandfather came up with two names for me, and one of them was chosen by a family vote. My given name is made up of two Chinese characters, phonetically written in Korean as 은 and 주 . The first character means 'blessed' and the second character means 'pearl.' The Korean naming practice that my family employed gave them freedom to give me a name that did several things: 1. My name was their faithful interpretation of my birth. By choosing the character for 'blessed,' they received me as a blessing from God, and they blessed me. 2. By choosing the character 'pearl,' they expressed their appreciation of me as being precious and beautiful. I am blessed to have a family that took such care in naming me. However, as much as I appreciate the care they have taken in giving me this name, I cannot deny the fact that "I was made a female" by their giving me this name. In other words, I was engendered. My beloved family was bound to their culture.

UNZU
LEE
PCUSA

I grew up in a Christian family. The word 하나님 (Ha-na-nim, meaning a deity in heaven) is most likely the word I heard frequently next to mother and father. We were steeped in Christian spirituality. But, this name was so intangible, so incomprehensible. To whom did this name belong? I was not sure. (In fact, I am still unsure most of the time.)

After making many detours, I ended up at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1985. In that fall, I took Hebrew. Every week, we took a quiz, and I earned small numbers. I was ashamed. Hebrew intimidated me. But then, one day, I experienced an explosion in my consciousness when I was doing word analysis of YHWH. I understood the word to be in the hiphil form, and I interpreted the name into "I will be whoever I will be." Some may be bothered by the nuance of indefiniteness in this name, but for me, it was most liberating. I could LOVE God who refused to be defined by human language that is a product of patriarchal culture. It was exhilarating to meet this God whose name was YHWH. With that experience, as far as I am concerned, my God was liberated from human language, and I was liberated from patriarchal definitions of God. My God is a verb, ever evolving, transgressing all human categories. YHWH is a perfect name for my God because this name "leaves open a large number of possibilities."¹⁷ This experience remains a critical memory in my God consciousness and faith journey. By the way, I received an A in Hebrew at the end of that fall semester.

¹⁷Martin Noth, Exodus, translated by J. S. Bowden (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962), 45.

APPENDIX B

Vision, Obstacles, Direction

The idea behind this exercise is that in this fast paced, changing-at-the-speed-of light culture we live in the language of goals and objectives has become cumbersome. When I am out with churches and I ask how many of them have participated in some form of 'strategic planning' in the last ten years, nearly everyone raises their hand and at least half the group groans. The next question I often ask is how did it work? And the responses don't vary much. 'It didn't work... it doesn't work ... we had a great plan but nobody wanted to implement it... or the leadership was on board but then congregation didn't know what was going on and why they needed to participate and the whole thing fell apart.' I rarely, if ever hear, we made a plan, we followed it and our results were exactly what we expected.

In many cases, Goals (general intentions like increase membership) and their inevitable counterpart Objectives (more precise like increase membership by 2% annually for five years.) are very specific to meet the SMART⁹ requirements (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and Timely) It's difficult to measure objectives that are not specific, however, objectives can also be too rigid – if you miss one, or fail at one what does it mean? Do you repeat the task until you get it right? Scrap the whole project and call it a failure?

The strategy here is to have a more fluid process that allows for Direction Setting instead of goal setting. It has been suggested that a sailing analogy works well here – (I'm not a sailor so forgive me if this doesn't connect well). When sailing, a direct line from here to there is never possible because of the way a sailboat works. Instead, one has to vision where s/he is headed, take into consideration current conditions (wind, waves, obstacles – other boats, sand bars etc...) and then set a course that is not exact. The process constantly changes as new information is presented (wind gusts, speed boats) but the overall direction stays the same.

Another way to think about it is that it is more a way of being, then of doing. It is not a list of objectives to check off once they have been completed, it is a process that changes the way we are an organization (committee, community etc...) together.

INTRODUCTION

vision obstacles direction[®]

⁹Copyright 2008 Kawata/Choy/Moore-Nokes (used with permission). For more information on VOD, contact Rev. Sarah Moore-Nokes, Associate Executive Presbyter Presbytery of Winnebago, Presbyterian Church (USA) Appleton, WI sarah@winnebagopresbytery.org

⁹Peter Drucker, in his 1954 seminal work, "The Practice of Management" coined the usage of the acronym for SMART objectives while discussing objective-based management.

1 ASK VISION QUESTIONS

What is it that you want for your organization (committee, congregation, community)?

What dreams do you have?

What do you want to accomplish?

The key here is to focus only on what the dreams are and not get bogged down in 'but we can't do that because...'

EXAMPLES

1. We want to increase our membership and bring young families into the congregation.
2. We want to be the church that is known in the community for mission.
3. We want the best VBS in town

2 LIST OBSTACLES

If _____ is your vision then why aren't you there?

What is it that is stopping you from being there?

For each vision item, list the obstacles.

EXAMPLES

1. We can't bring in new families because St. Margaret Mary has a pre-school and all the families go there.
2. We can't do mission like we want to because there isn't enough money
3. No one wants to teach VBS. The same teachers teach every year and they only want to do the _____ program which nobody likes.

3 ASK DIRECTION QUESTIONS

Given your vision and the obstacles you have named, what are some directions you might go to begin to head toward your vision?

EXAMPLES

1. Provide childcare for every event at our church ensuring that young families can attend without having to worry about arranging for childcare and can participate without having to run to the nursery every ten minutes.
2. Begin to look at everything that happens in our church as mission. Look at the community to discover where the needs are greatest. Begin 'doing' mission by using people power – not money.
3. Merge with St. Gregory across the street and do joint VBS or scrap VBS altogether.

A presbytery task group is working on the issue of communication. Many changes have been made the structure of Presbytery A. The program committees have been eliminated and replaced by a single coordinating body with many task groups. The former Communication Committee which compiled and published the quarterly Presbytery Newsletter is now the Communications Task Group. A quarterly newsletter no longer meets the needs of the Presbytery but the task group is unsure how to proceed. A one hour planning meeting yields the following:

THE NEW VISION for a newsletter that works to

- connect our churches and members by
- sharing information,
- publicizing events and
- sharing news of our churches and the larger denomination and
- that it be made available in a timely fashion

OBSTACLES:

Current format doesn't work because:

- it is not timely
- is very time consuming to compile, layout and print,
- reporting is happening too late,
- printer's timeline for publication takes too long,
- deadlines are not respected,
- not enough people working on gathering info/writing articles, etc....

THE NEW DIRECTION:

Create new format for communication (digital emphasis) by:

- Writing two new volunteer job descriptions and recruiting new members
- Re-working publication timelines
- Emphasizing deadlines and sticking to them
- Co publishing (paper format and digital format)

By the end, the task group had a plan for the new format, had written the two job descriptions and figured out how best to publicize them and had a plan for re-working the deadlines and timelines.

FOLLOW-UP

What actually happened? The editor resigned and despite a valiant effort to recruit new members, no one stepped forward to join the task group. Two months later, the task group was able to decide to cease publication of the current newsletter and focus communication efforts elsewhere. The decision was fairly easily made because the task group felt they had a good plan, they had followed well and it was clear that it wasn't working. There was no hemming and hawing ... "if we had just tried this," or "what if we had...." because the DIRECTION still stands, and in fact work is currently being done to create new formats for communication in line with the vision originally stated.

CRITIQUES OF THIS EXERCISE ARE

1. That it is too internal a process and does not have built in a way to examine external components.
2. It is not structured enough. This of course depends on the personality of the group and the facilitator and the tolerance for some ambiguity on both sides. Some groups love the flexibility – others are paralyzed by the lack of specific goals.

