



The Presbyterian Panel

Listening to Presbyterians



SUMMARY

LANGUAGE AND GOD—THE FEBRUARY 1999 SUMMARY

The Presbyterian Panel consists of three nationally-representative samples of groups affiliated with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.): members, elders (lay leaders), and ordained ministers (for analysis, split into two groups based on current call: *pastors*, serving in a congregation, and *specialized clergy*, serving elsewhere). New samples are drawn every three years. These pages summarize major findings from the tenth survey completed by the 1997-1999 Panel.

PICTURING GOD

Images of God

- ✓ The most widely and strongly held images of God include “Creator,” “Redeemer,” “Father,” and “Healer.” Around 90% in every sample are *extremely likely* to have the image of “Creator” come to mind when they think about God; three in four, the image of “Redeemer”; and two in three, the image of “Healer.” Around three in four members and elders imagine God as “Father,” compared to one in two ordained ministers.

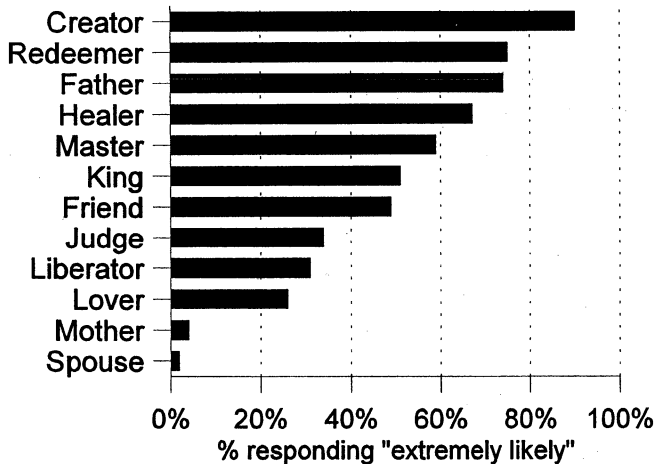


Figure 1
Images of God Held by Members

- ✓ Of the 12 images listed, the image least likely to come to mind in every sample is “Spouse,” seen as *not too likely* or *not at all likely* by 92% of elders, pastors, and specialized clergy, and 89% of members.

- ✓ Clergy are more likely than laity to imagine God as “Mother” and as “Lover,” and laity are more likely than clergy to imagine God as “Judge” and as “Master.”

Male and Female Images

- ✓ Imagining God as “Father” is reported as *extremely likely* or *somewhat likely* by large majorities in all samples, ranging from 89% (pastors) and 84% (specialized ministers) among clergy to 94% among both groups of laity. Corresponding percentages imagining God as “Mother” are 46% among specialized clergy, 38% among pastors, 16% among elders, and 13% among members.
- ✓ Almost all laity (members, 94%; elders, 92%) and large majorities of ordained ministers (specialized clergy, 76%; pastors, 72%) *agree* that “as a child I pictured God to be of male gender.”
- ✓ Only one in nine clergy, but around one-half of both members and elders, *agree* that “God is best understood in masculine terms.” Few members (13%) and elders (16%) *agree* that “the Bible contains many female images of God,” but most pastors (78%) and specialized clergy (73%) *agree* with this statement.
- ✓ Overall, around two in every three members and elders, and over nine in ten ordained ministers, *agree* that “God is beyond gender . . . God is neither female nor male.”

The Big Picture

- ✓ Majorities of panelists in every sample *agree* that “our language about God should be varied and diverse, reflecting the wide range of terms to describe God that are found in the Bible and the Reformed tradition” (66% of members, 63% of elders, 91% of pastors, and 93% of specialized clergy express this view).
- ✓ Majorities of pastors (66%) and specialized clergy (76%) *agree* that “use of gender-inclusive language is consistent with the overall message of the Bible.” Lay panelists, however, are less certain: only 40% of members and 36% of elders *agree* with this statement.

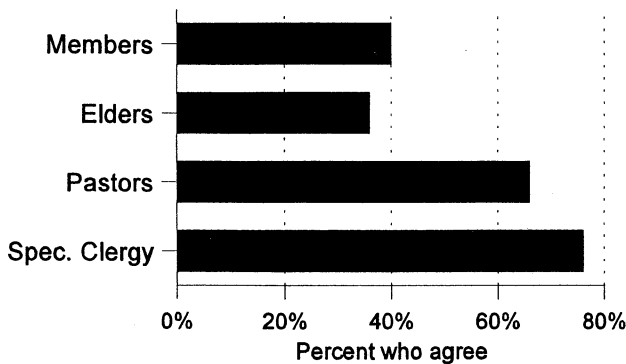


Figure 2
"Use of Gender-Inclusive Language is Consistent with the Overall Message of the Bible"

- ✓ At least eight in ten panelists in every sample *agree* that “most people use male terms for God simply because that’s the traditional language of the church.”

Wording Preferences

- ✓ Most panelists prefer that the customary language at the beginning of the Lord’s Prayer, “Our Father [who art] in heaven,” continue to be used when the Lord’s Prayer is prayed during worship. This preference is held by 92% of members, 90% of elders, 80% of pastors, and 66% of specialized clergy. Most panelists who favor different words would opt for gender-neutral language (“Our Creator in heaven”) over a gender-inclusive construction such as “Our Father and Mother in heaven . . .”

- ✓ Panelists generally prefer that the traditional language of the church—“Father, Son, and Holy Spirit [or Ghost]”—continue to be used when reference is made to the Trinitarian nature of God. The preference is greatest among members (88% prefer this wording) and elders (86%), and is also relatively high among pastors (62%). Among specialized clergy, however, 51% would opt for a *change* to gender-neutral language.
- ✓ When given a choice between more gender-inclusive and less gender-inclusive options for words and phrases about people that one might encounter in worship, large majorities in every sample favor a more-inclusive option. For example, 2% of members prefer “brothers,” but 78% prefer “brothers and sisters” when reference is made to a group in church that contains both males and females.
- ✓ Panelists show a strong preference for the gender-neutral option over a gender-inclusive one for language about the church. For example, 68% of members would prefer “people of God,” while 24% would prefer “men and women of God.” (Only 2% prefer “men of God.”)

Translating and Modifying Texts

- ✓ Few panelists want masculine terms for God modified to gender-neutral terms in Bible translations if “the original meaning is somewhat changed in the process.” In fact, large majorities of members (80%) and elders (76%) want *no* change at all in these circumstances. Ministers, however, are more divided: while 49% of pastors and 37% of specialized clergy want a translation that sticks to the original, 43% and 52%, respectively, prefer an approach that would “modify the language to be more gender-neutral . . . as long as the general meaning does not change.”
- ✓ When the Bible uses male words to refer to people in general, three in four members (75%) and elders (71%) would prefer that the English translation do so as well. However, 84% of pastors and 82% of specialized clergy would prefer that the translation modify the language to find a more gender-neutral or gender-inclusive word or phrase.

OPINIONS AND PREFERENCES

- ✓ What to do with hymns that contain non-gender-inclusive words or phrases? Exactly half of pastors and at least 44% in the other samples *agree* that “we shouldn’t change traditional texts and hymns, but efforts should be made to ensure that new hymns and texts are more inclusive.” A quarter of members, a third of elders and pastors, and 40% of specialized clergy *disagree* with this statement.

included, and makes 16% of members and 13% of pastors feel *less included*.

- ✓ More than two-thirds of pastors and specialized clergy and large minorities of members (46%) and elders (49%), *disagree* with the statement, “It offends me when someone uses terms other than ‘Father, Son, and Holy Spirit’ to refer to the persons of the Trinity.”

Language and Feelings of Inclusion

- ✓ The use of gender-linked terms to refer to God during worship makes some panelists feel more included and others less included in the worship experience.
 - use of male pronouns such as “He” to refer to God makes 13% of members and 4% of pastors feel *more included*, and 2% of members and 19% of pastors feel *less included*.
 - use of female pronouns such as “She” to refer to God makes 2% of members and 8% of pastors feel *more included*, and makes 30% of both members and pastors feel *less included*.
 - use of gender-neutral terms to refer to God makes 6% of members and 27% of pastors feel *more*

Importance of Language Issues

- ✓ Large majorities of ministers, but fewer than four in ten lay panelists, rate “the issue of gender in language about God” as either *very important* or *important* to them personally.
- ✓ Less than a quarter of members and elders, but three in four pastors and specialized clergy, rate as *very important* or *important* that “when people speak in worship . . . they use gender-neutral or gender-inclusive terms” when referring to “the church and the people of God.”

Do Men and Women View Gender in the Language about God Differently?

Male and female **members** typically hold similar opinions. Among the few exceptions, men are more likely to view God as a “Judge,” and women are more likely to view God as “Friend.” Men are more likely to *agree* that “God is best understood in masculine terms.”

Male and female **elders** also express similar views on many items, but more differences are apparent. Female elders are more favorable than male elders toward modifying the language of the Lord’s Prayer or other Scripture to make it more gender neutral. And female elders are more likely than male elders to feel *less included* by the use of masculine terms and pronouns to refer to God.

Differences are even more widespread between men and women who are **pastors and specialized clergy**. On almost every question, more female clergy than male clergy favor increased use of gender-neutral language. Significantly, too, more female than male pastors and other clergy also see the issue of gender and language about God as *very important* to them, personally.

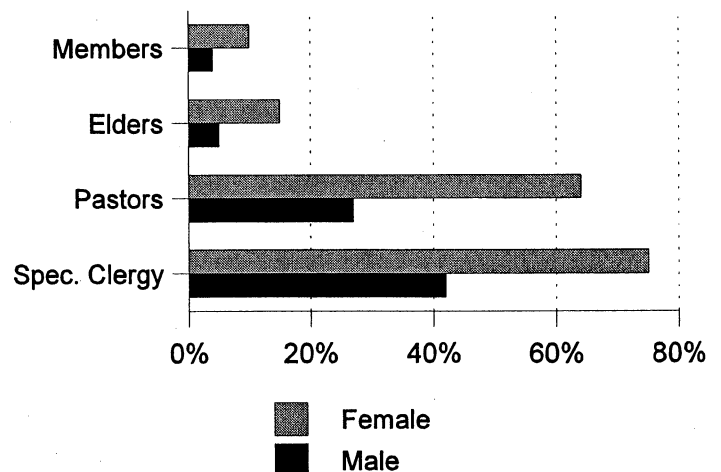


Figure 3
Percent Who Favor Gender-Neutral Language When Referring to God as Trinity

PRACTICE AND POLICY

Policies

- ✓ According to pastors, only 5% of their congregations “have an official policy, approved by the session, encouraging the use of ‘gender-neutral’ or ‘gender-inclusive’ terms in worship when referring to God” and only 8% have such a policy when “referring to the church . . . the people of God.”
- ✓ Majorities in three of the four samples (53% of members, 60% of elders, 64% of pastors, but 47% of specialized clergy) believe that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) should *not* have “a general policy on what gender-related language is appropriate when Presbyterians refer to God.”
- ✓ Only four in ten pastors, one in three specialized clergy, and one in twenty members and elders, are either *generally familiar* or *very familiar* with the set of guidelines on language about God the church approved by the General Assembly in the 1980s.

Congregational Practices

- ✓ According to majorities of pastors, it is “general practice . . . for worship services” at their church to use male pronouns when referring to God even though almost as many also report that their churches encourage the use of gender-neutral terms for God.
- ✓ Majorities of pastors report that, at least occasionally during worship, the person reading Scripture will

substitute “God” or another more gender-inclusive noun when the printed text uses a male pronoun such as “He” to refer to God.

- ✓ Almost all congregations represented by panelists pray the Lord’s Prayer during worship at least occasionally, and almost without exception, these congregations use the conventional wording, “Our Father [who art] in heaven,” to begin the prayer.
- ✓ Few congregations ever exclude the Lord’s Prayer or other items from worship “solely or primarily because, as conventionally worded, they refer to God as ‘Father.’” In all, only 6% of pastors report such language-based exclusions, primarily the “Gloria Patri” (5%) and the Doxology (3%).
- ✓ Nine in ten pastors report that at baptisms in their church the minister uses the conventional language of the church to refer to the Trinitarian nature of God: “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit [or Ghost].”

Personal Practices

- ✓ When praying, most members (88%), elders (89%), and pastors (59%) address God as “Father” either *always* or *often*. Few panelists ever address God as “Mother.”
- ✓ Most panelists address God as “Creator” at least *occasionally* in their prayers, but few do so *always*.

	Members	Elders	Ordained Ministers*
Number of surveys mailed	928	1,052	1,591
Number returned	618	731	1,184
Response rate	66%	69%	74%

*Of the 1,184 returned surveys, 798 came from pastors and 386 from specialized clergy.

This survey was initially mailed in February 1999, and returns were accepted through March 1999. Results are subject to sampling and other errors. Small differences should be interpreted cautiously. As a general rule, differences of less than 6% between samples are not statistically meaningful.

For more numbers and interpretation of the February 1999 Presbyterian Panel results, a longer report with additional charts and graphs is available for \$5. Contact PDS (1-800-524-2612) and order PDS#65100-99259. Included is a data appendix that presents the percentage responses to each survey question separately for members, elders, pastors, and specialized clergy.

For more information on gender, language, and God in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) contact Charles Wiley of the office of Theology and Worship at 502-569-5734.

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