



## **Inclusive Language Guidelines:**

**You belong because you are...**

**a person first!**

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# Guidelines for Inclusive Language

## Overview

This document was compiled as a result of much research and work by the Affirming Ministry Action Committee of Robert McClure United Church, Calgary, Alberta. The dedicated members of this committee include, Linda Bossler, Barb Lough, Darlene Montgomery, Louise Omania, Kelcie Dani-Anne Perih and Darlene Thompson. In producing these guidelines, we are attempting to create a living document that will encourage us to continue to expand our language to be inclusive of everyone. Therefore, this is an aspirational document to reflect values of amazing grace and radical hospitality. Our goal is to ensure that everyone who walks through our doors will feel they truly and completely belong, just as they are.

In the words of the Affirming Faith Statement for our congregation, “we stand with all humanity and celebrate its wonderful aspects acknowledging diversity in age, health, race, economic status, ethnicity, beliefs, culture, gender identity, sexual orientation, and whoever YOU are.”

Each of these wonderfully diverse aspects of humanity are included in the topic headings for exploring inclusive language. Within each topic there is a rationale and/or background information; a section contrasting preferred language to not preferred language; and in most cases there are scriptural references and examples of preferred language in use.

The **Introduction** takes a look at what inclusive language means and why we need to have these guidelines.

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## **Introduction**

### **What does “inclusive language” mean?**

In these guidelines, we are using “**inclusive language**” to mean language that includes everyone, especially people who have historically been marginalized and excluded because of their race, criminal record, gender, sexuality or ability; “**inclusive language**” focuses on a person’s or a group’s humanity – what they have in common with other human beings, rather than their apparent differences.

Here are some familiar examples of “inclusive language”:

The use of “everybody” to greet an audience (Good morning, everybody.), which leaves no person out, rather than “ladies and gentlemen” (Good morning, ladies and gentlemen.), which leaves out many people, including children, youth and people whose gender identity does not fit neatly into the categories of “ladies” or “gentlemen”.

The use of “older person”, which is respectful, rather than “old lady” or “old man”, which are demeaning and potentially hurtful.

The use of words that our native people use to describe themselves – “Indigenous”, “First Nations”, “Métis”, and “Inuit”, etc., which respect their wish to be called by their own names, rather than “Indian” or “Eskimo”, which are labels applied to them by settlers who were ignorant of the origin and cultures of native people.

The use of words such as “Creator,” “Mother,” “Compassion,” “Love,” “Holy Mystery,” “Light,” “Fire,” “Infinity” in addition to “Lord” and “Father” to demonstrate there are many ways of seeing, naming and describing God. We are not abandoning our traditional ways of describing God; we are adding other possibilities so that everyone’s image of God can be accommodated.

We would like to highlight a particular guiding principle throughout this document. The primary focus for preferred language is to apply a *person first* approach. Much of what we say and do within a church community is relational. So, whoever you are ‘relating to’ or ‘conversing about,’ *the person comes first*. These guidelines are to assist us in recognizing all the intersecting aspects of our humanity without the need to always label people.

For example:

Simply refer to a person by their name, Tanis; not Tanis, who is in a wheelchair.  
When talking about a collective group, start by referring to them as people; such as people experiencing homelessness rather than ‘the homeless.’

## **Why do we need guidelines for inclusive language?**

Robert McClure United Church is proud to proclaim that we are an Affirming Ministry, a church where everyone will be welcomed and valued. We assert this emphatically outside and inside our church: “You belong because you are.” In our Affirming Ministry Faith Statement, we acknowledge and celebrate the diversity of human beings in age, health (both physical and mental), race, economic status, ethnicity, beliefs, culture, gender identity and sexual orientation. We pledge to create a safe space for everyone to participate in the life, work and ministry of our church community.

An important part of “walking the talk” of an Affirming Ministry is making conscious, deliberate choices in the words we use to describe other people and groups so that our language honours and respects their diversity and their humanity. We make “a commitment to take care with our words in ways that always promote more participation by more people across our many differences.” (MCC, 2017, pp. 1-2) We want our words to reinforce the assertion we have often heard from the pulpit: “You are exactly what God had in mind when God created you.”

We extend and refine our understanding of other people, ourselves and our relationship to one another when we reflect on the language we use:

What words do we typically (perhaps unconsciously) use to describe other people and groups?

If our words were overheard by those others, how would our words make them feel – welcome? respected? rejected? insulted?

Are there other words we could choose to more effectively communicate our intention to honour, respect and draw those people into our church community?

These questions challenge us to assume personal responsibility for examining our own language use, and where necessary, considering alternative words to those we habitually use.

Another important part of “walking the talk” of an Affirming Ministry is consciously and deliberately exploring different ways of expressing our understanding of God. “The words chosen to describe our understanding of the divine and our understanding of gospel messages not only reflect our reality but, in fact, help to create it.” (MCC, 2017, p. 1) We are not being asked to give up our traditional and treasured ways of talking about God; rather, we are being invited to expand our repertoire of language and imagery to accommodate other ways of seeing God and deepening our own understanding of our Creator by reflecting on the words we use:

What words and images do we typically (perhaps unconsciously) use to describe God?

Do our words and images limit (i.e., an older white male) or extend our understanding of God?

What words and images do others use to describe God?

Can their words and images inspire in us a deeper understanding of all that God can be?

The guidelines for inclusive language presented below are intended to provide helpful examples, starting points for expanding and refining the language we use to refer to other human beings and to God. Although the guidelines present these examples in categories (such as “gender identity/sexual orientation”, “age”, etc.), we recognize that human beings are not one-dimensional and may not fit neatly into these categories. Words that feel like a warm flannel shirt to one person may feel like a scratchy wool sweater to another person. And even groups who appear to have a shared background of experience may respond to words in unexpected ways: “...words that make one oppressed group feel more welcome may at the same time inadvertently cause another oppressed group to feel isolated.” (MCC, 2017, p. 1) We will need to be sensitive to these differences, invite feedback, and be prepared to make changes in the way we use language in response to feedback.

Therefore, the guidelines for inclusive language should not be viewed as “rules” for language use; “Commandments” hammered in stone, never to be changed. This is a “living document” – a perpetual work-in-progress that will be reviewed and revised regularly. It belongs to everyone and it is our collective responsibility to ensure that it is fulfilling its purpose, to make everyone in our church community feel welcome and valued. We hope you will embrace the guidelines for inclusive language in this spirit.

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## Specific Guidelines for Inclusive Language

### Gender Identity / Sexual Orientation

#### Interrupting Male Privilege

We begin by recognizing and acknowledging the privileged status of masculinity that is so ingrained in our culture and language. These guidelines incorporate language to honour the equality and potential of women and other non-masculine genders. Through inclusive terms and pronouns, we aim to further convey, “You belong because you are.”

#### Preferred

*people, humanity, humankind  
they, their  
one, they, those*

#### Not Preferred

*man or mankind  
he, his  
he*

*For example: “Those who come to me shall not hunger,” instead of “He who comes to me shall not hunger.” (MCC, 2017. p. 3)*

#### References to God

The biblical scriptures primarily refer to God as male. Yet within the scriptures there are many examples that express more expansive images of God. As an Affirming Ministry we proclaim that ‘God loves diversity’. To reflect this, we encourage the intentional use of terms and pronouns that balance male terminology with feminine and gender-neutral language for God, as well as using broader terms such as Compassion, Light, Infinity, etc.

#### Preferred

*she, they, their, in addition to he  
one, who, whom  
God, God’s, God’s self  
Creator  
Source of Life  
Rock  
Everlasting One  
Most Holy  
Mother-Father-Parent God  
Heavenly One*

#### Not Preferred

*exclusive male terms*

*For example: “Please join me in the Prayer that Jesus Taught using the language that has meaning for you. \_\_\_\_\_ who art in heaven....” (MCC, 2017, p. 1)*

It would be explained (and suggestions offered), inviting people to use the word, or words, that are most meaningful to them at the opening of the prayer. Examples could be, but are not limited to, *Creator, Holy Mystery, Source of Love, Our Mother, The Great I AM.*

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<http://philosophyreaders.blogspot.com/2019/07/a-case-for-gender-inclusive-lords-prayer.html>

### References to Jesus

“The historical person, Jesus of Nazareth, was male – but it is Jesus’ qualities that we affirm and want to emphasize, not his maleness...When referring to the risen Christ, it can be helpful to use a range of gendered and gender-neutral terms and pronouns to convey the limitless qualities of this messianic figure.” (MCC, 2017, p. 4)

#### Preferred

*Teacher, Shepherd, Spiritual Director*  
*Healer, Peace Giver*  
*Child, Jesus*  
*The Human One, Liberator, Redeemer*  
*Child of God*

#### Not Preferred

*Master*  
*Lord*  
*Son*  
*Son of Man*  
*Son of God*

*For Example: Luke 6:5 Then Jesus said to them, “The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.”* (The scripture would be read as presented in the Bible. The message offers the opportunity to present an alternative way to express the Biblical phrase with examples of preferred terminology; i.e., *Jesus is the Spiritual Director of the Sabbath*)

### References to People

Knowing each other by name and our identifying pronouns is key to building relationships and creating a healthy, loving community. [Please note Appendix A]  
To truly convey a sense of belonging, we will use words to express the diverse identities of all who join this faith journey.

#### Preferred

*brothers and sisters and siblings*  
*spouses and partners*  
*people of all gender identities*  
*siblings*  
*kin, families*  
*people, folks*

#### Not Preferred

*exclusively male & binary terms*

*For example: We gather in Worship as brothers, and sisters and siblings in Christ.*  
*Or We gather in Worship as siblings in Christ.*

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## **Beliefs**

As Christians we are not a homogeneous group; with all holding the same beliefs in the same moment in time. Richard Rohr describes the spiritual journey with these words, “we are all participating – with varying degrees of resistance and consent – in the faith journey that Jesus has already walked.” (Rohr, 2017) Along this faith journey, people will be growing into spiritual maturity at different paces and with their own biases. Each of our understandings of faith, beliefs and doctrines will be viewed through different lenses. As Rohr points out, “My lenses aren’t necessarily better than others, but they are the ones I began with. ... All each of us can do is *own and expose* our biases, because we all have them.” (Rohr, 2015) A faith community must recognize, honour and respect the diverse stages and paces and gifts of spiritual growth that comprises the whole community. Paul describes this so well in his letter to the Corinthians, using the analogy of ‘one body, many parts.’ (1 Cor. 12: 12-31)

### **Preferred**

*Open, non-judgmental dialogue*

*I would like to understand your perspective*

*What do you think of \_\_\_\_\_?*

*This makes sense to me ...*

*In my spiritual journey, I have learned ...*

### **Not Preferred**

*Closed minded and biased*

*Surely you don’t believe that?!*

*Where is that in the Bible?*

*That is pretty ancient theology!*

As a Christian faith community, we follow the teachings of Jesus. That is not to say that there is not valuable wisdom and insight from other faith traditions that could enhance and compliment what we teach and believe. The teachings and wisdom of other faith traditions can be woven into the liturgy and message within our worship service, appropriately.

No matter what an individual professes as their religious belief, they have a place of belonging within our affirming ministry. With this in mind, we cannot assume that other people believe in some form of Christianity or that they share the same faith beliefs. A person may have little or no religious affiliation and may not wish to be part of certain Christian celebrations. We cannot make assumptions about how an individual may or may not choose to live out their faith. It would be inappropriate to force or coerce anyone to accept or comply with our particular religious beliefs and practices. Respecting a person’s religious and faith beliefs also means using language that is inclusive and appropriate.

### **Preferred**

*My goodness, oh my gosh*

*Address a person by their first name*

*Dialogues about religious experience;*

*Share forms of prayer and spiritual ideas*

*Refer to faith groups by proper name*

*Protestant, Catholic, Evangelical, Jewish,*

*Muslim, Sikh*

### **Not Preferred**

*“Oh my GOD”*

*What is your Christian name?*

*False Assumptions about other religions*

*No offensive terms; Cathaholic, Holy Roller, Jewboy, Oven dodger, Raghead, Curry muncher, Infidel*

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## Age

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), “Ageism refers to stereotypes (how we think), prejudice (how we feel) and discrimination (how we act) directed towards people on the basis of their age.” Ageism affects people of all ages and can have a corrosive impact on how we see ourselves and our potential.

The Scriptures remind us of the worth and dignity of every person, whatever their age:

**Luke 18: 15-16** “People even brought forward their infants for Jesus to touch. When the disciples saw this, they scolded the parents. However, Jesus intervened by calling the children to himself. He said, ‘Let the children come to me. Don’t stop them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.’” (The Inclusive Bible)

**Luke 2: 46-47** “On the third day they came upon Jesus in the Temple; sitting in the midst of the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. All who heard Jesus were amazed at his understanding and his answers.” (The Inclusive Bible)

**Job 12:12** “Wisdom comes with aging, and understanding with length of days.” (The Inclusive Bible)

The United Church of Canada affirms the value of all persons at every stage of their lives. In *What We Believe*, the church states that “Children and youth have much to contribute to the body of Christ... Taking young people seriously is essential to the journey towards wholeness in the church.” And in “An Ethical and Theological Statement on Ageing”, the church acknowledges that older people also make an important contribution to their faith communities: “The latter years of life offer unique opportunities for new perspectives on God’s call to be faithful. We are called to consider all aspects of life as part of our human journey. As a community of believers, we are the body of Christ in the world; we create sacred spaces that are accessible and welcoming to all people.” (2006: 37)

Our church has dedicated itself to being an affirming ministry, and therefore, we are perfectly positioned to overcome the damaging consequences of ageism and ageist language. The WHO suggests that inter-generational educational activities, which bring people of different generations together, can reduce prejudice and stereotypes. The development of our Affirming Ministry Faith Statement is a powerful example of an intergenerational project in which the voices of people of all ages were honoured equally. Here is how one member of the congregation remembers the involvement of our youth in the process, beginning with a reflection on Luke 2:46-47 (quoted above):

When I hear or read this story, of Jesus after his bar mitzvah – pursuing his interest in the scriptures and gaining knowledge and understanding from the Temple elders, I am struck by the image of equals. The Temple teachers did not dismiss him nor belittle his audacity, nor ask him to leave. Rather, they engaged with him and were impressed with his knowledge and maturity beyond his years. It reminds me of the McClure youth who were very important in the creation...of our Affirming Ministry Faith Statement. Their ideas...were honoured, and they played an important role in the process.

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In its 2021 *Global Report on Ageism*, the WHO recommends that ageist language, such as “elderly, old and senior,” which stereotype older people as frail and dependent, and “juvenile,” which stereotypes young people as immature, should be replaced with more neutral language: **younger person** and **younger people**, and **older person** and **older people**. (2021:xx) We will adopt these terms, along with our own preferred term for younger people, “youth”, in our guidelines for inclusive language.

Inclusive language to describe younger people. Except for the first line, which comes from the *Global Report on Ageism*, the following recommendations came from conversations with younger people.

**Preferred**

*youth, younger person, younger people, person, student, people, use my name eager, enthusiastic, energetic assertive, confident, adventurous, committed, diligent uncertain, scared of failing*

*thoughtful, sometimes sad cautious, careful independent, earnest*

**Not Preferred**

*teenager, juvenile kids, “all the same” rude, loud aggressive*

*lazy, unmotivated, irresponsible moody snowflake, little snowflake rebellious, immature, stubborn (Please stop calling us “hormonal”. There aren’t any nicer words for this.)*

Inclusive language to describe older people. Except for the first line, which comes from the *Global Report on Ageism*, the following recommendations came from conversations with older people.

**Preferred**

*older person, older people Elder (when appropriate with Indigenous People)*

*use the person’s name*

*experienced, wisely cautious*

*avoid pejorative labels for age groups*

**Not Preferred**

*elderly, old, senior*

*young man, young lady honey, sweetie, dear (to address someone you don’t know)*

*old, inflexible, set in their ways biddy, fogey, golden agers, bed blockers boomers, latchkey generation, MTV generation, Karen*

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## Health – Mental and Physical Attributes

People with varying physical and/or mental attributes have a place in our faith community. The inherent mental and physical qualities of an individual are only one aspect of a person's life. A person need not be defined by or labeled with some kind of 'condition.' All individuals belong just as they are.

When speaking to or about a person who is differently abled, it is important to focus on the person and not abilities. (adapted from Words Matter: 17) For example, we can use phrases such as 'people with varying abilities' and 'a person with different abilities.' That being said, some people prefer *identity-first* language where the inherent quality is recognized as something that can't be separated from who they are. Consider this scenario, your neighbor who is Deaf might refer to themselves as a Deaf person. (Mandate: 32) As a general rule, be sensitive to a person's preferences; ask them to tell you what they prefer.

A person can be born with certain attributes (congenital) or they may acquire differing abilities through age, illness or accident. Furthermore, some varying abilities can be visible (e.g., use of a wheelchair due to spinal cord injury) or non- visible (e.g., mental health challenges) or occur only periodically (e.g., seasonal). (adapted from Words Matter: 17) Don't assume that because you don't know that someone is living with challenges that they are not.

### Preferred

*Refer to the person by name*

*(varying abilities need not be identified)*

*Using language that recognizes and respects the dignity and value of each person*

*You may choose to stand or sit.*

*Oh God, with love, respond to our prayer*

*"was bound but now I'm free"*

### Not Preferred

*[Name], the one who...is epileptic; is 'special'; has arthritis...*

*lame joke*

*to turn a blind eye*

*I've had a crazy week*

*Please stand as you are able*

*Oh God, hear our prayer*

*"was blind, but now I see."*

*(Amazing Grace)*

*Examples:*

- 1. An individual who uses a wheelchair has been asked to read the scripture. Accommodations are made so the person can use a microphone on the floor level. The individual is introduced by name. The use of a wheelchair is not mentioned as it has no bearing on their ability to read the scripture.*
- 2. When the individual is present with a caregiver, always remember to **talk to the person directly**, not about them with the caregiver.*
- 3. Remember, a service dog, a person's cane, chair or assistive device is considered part of their personal space. Only touch these items if invited. A service dog is working when wearing its harness. Please do not approach, pet or distract the dog.*
- 4. Always ask "May I help you with that?" The individual may be quite happy doing things for themselves, even if it takes longer.*

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## **Racial, Cultural and Ethnic Diversity**

### Anti-Racism Language

We recognize that racism is a systemic problem in Calgary, within Alberta, across Canada and around the World. At Robert McClure United Church, we wish to be part of the solution, taking a proactive stand against racism in all its forms.

The United Church of Canada has a Policy Statement on Anti-racism entitled, *That All May Be One*. Within that policy it is stated,

The United Church family is endowed with racial, cultural, and ethnic diversity which it must cherish and celebrate. As in any human family, love of God and of each other, commitment and responsibility toward one another must dominate our lives. (7)

Further directives from the UC Policy Statement on Anti-Racism include:

2.6. Encouraging the review of worship and Christian education resources, and other visual and written materials at all levels of the church from an anti-racism perspective (See the anti-racism education resource, “That All May Be One”, compiled by the Education Working Group)

2.8. Enhancing our worship and ministry by using sources and interpretations from racial and ethnocultural minority experiences, theologies and analyses

2.9. Enriching our worship and ministry through the use of diverse racial and ethnocultural music, song, images of God, stories and practices (11)

*As an example, consider these points made in a blog written by Adele Halliday, Anti-Racism and Equity Officer with The United Church of Canada.*

- *we have become accustomed to equating evil as black, and purity as white... so Black people are evil and white people are good.*
- *this black/white and darkness/light dichotomy can result in internalized racism.*
- *what then do we do when the Bible and Christian rituals are filled with images of light and darkness as goodness and evil?*
- *we can expand our vocabulary so that darkness does not always equate evil, and light does not always equate good.*

#### **Preferred**

*clean, bright, harsh/bad  
shadow, struggle, evil, wrongness  
hard, dank, gloom, bright*

#### **Not Preferred**

*white, dark/black as sin  
darkness, dark,  
darkie, brownie, half breed  
illegal\* immigrant, alien*

\*Actions are illegal, people are not. The word illegal has been applied and abused by those advocating for harsh immigration policies (Language Decoded: 12)

### White Privilege/White Supremacy

Our intent in these guidelines is to name and expose White privilege/supremacy for the way it affects inclusive language use within Robert McClure United Church.

Desmond Cole, author of *The Skin We're In* writes, "White Supremacy is a global phenomenon, and has been used to justify European imperialist conquest and exploitation in Africa, the America's, Asia, and Oceania.... White supremacy is never personal, never individual, never isolated. (It is) a system of power that seeks to benefit white people above all others... white supremacy thrives in large part by avoiding being named or identified."

White supremacy is often misunderstood as only applying to right-wing radicals or extremists' groups. Dr. Robin Di Angelo writes, "*White supremacy* is not simply the idea that whites are superior to people of color, but a deeper premise that supports this idea—the definition of whites as the norm or standard for human".

Di Angelo suggests that white privilege is not different from white supremacy. White privilege implies that white people are inherently more deserving than others, implying that white people are superior to everyone else.

Historically, language used by white men when racializing people was based around the premise that "white" is the default. Language describing difference of race has included terms such as "non-white", "non-white, non-black", "people of color", "BIPOC" (black, indigenous, people of color), "BAME" (black, asian, minority ethnic) and "visible minority". New language is suggested by veteran educator Rosemary Campbell-Stephens.

The term "*Global Majority*" was coined by Campbell-Stephens.

*Global Majority is a collective term that first and foremost speaks to and encourages those so-called, to think of themselves as belonging to the majority on planet earth. It refers to people who are Black, African, Asian, Brown, dual-heritage, indigenous to the global south, and or, have been racialised as 'ethnic minorities'.*

In an opinion piece for the Toronto Star, Sachin Marharaj supports the use of the term "*global majority*" as this language represents "*the vast majority (around 80 per cent) of people in the world. Understanding the truth that whiteness is not the global norm has the power to disrupt and reframe our conversations on race*".

Blogger, Daniel Lim, suggests the term "*people of the global majority*" (PGM) be used as this term "*not only decenters whiteness, but renders it irrelevant.*"

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Acquiring English as a first language is a privilege. European settlement colonization and forced resettlement of indigenous peoples brought with it the requirement to speak English. This requirement has become the default in schools, professions and society at large. Simons (2019) reports 61% of languages worldwide that were spoken as a first language in 1795 are doomed or extinct (10). What remains is known as White Language Supremacy (WLS) which imposes a worldview that is simultaneously pro-white, cisgender, male, heteronormative, patriarchal, ableist, racist, and capitalist (CCCC, 2021).

**Preferred**

*person of color*

*person from “country of origin”*

*under-represented ethnic group*

*global majority\*(more information needs to be provided)*

**Not Preferred**

*non-White*

*non-European*

*minority*

**Building Reconciliation through Language**

Part of the path towards reconciliation is using language that more accurately reflects the Indigenous Peoples of Canada.

There are three distinct groups of Indigenous Peoples in Canada: First Nations (status and nonstatus Indians), Métis and Inuit.

“Indigenous Peoples” is commonly used as a collective term for all of the original peoples of Canada and their descendants.

“Indigenous people” with a lower case “people” is simply referring to more than one Indigenous person rather than the collective group of Indigenous Peoples. (Words Matter: 11)

In Canada, there is a shift towards the use of “Indigenous” as the collective term, but “Aboriginal” may still be used. e.g., “Aboriginal and treaty rights” in the Constitution Act, or the “Aboriginal Peoples’ Television Network. (Words Matter: 13)

**Preferred**

*refer to particular First Nations group by*

*its chosen name;*

*Indigenous people “living in Canada”*

*try to identify the tribal affiliation or community, and use Indigenous spellings for the names of communities; learn correct pronunciation*

*enhance worship with music, song, images of God, stories and practices of the local Indigenous people*

**Not Preferred**

*Indian\**

*Eskimo*

*“belonging to Canada” or*

*“Our Indigenous People”*

*colloquial phrases – Indian Time;*

*Long Time No See; drunken good*

*for nothing; low man on the totem*

*pole*

\* “Indian” may be used as an in-group term, often among older First Nations people. When dealing with specific people or groups from the Indigenous community, it is always best to find out what term they prefer. (Words Matter, 12)  
“Indian” is also still used in government documents such as the *Indian Act*.

### Body Shaming

Body shaming is language or thoughts that make a person feel uncomfortable, humiliated or embarrassed about their body. Body shaming can be directed at any part of a person’s appearance (height, hair, skin tone or condition, etc.); we are focusing on its most predominant target – a person’s body size or weight. Our aim is to start a conversation about body shaming.

We all have an image in our heads of the ideal, perfect body. Most often the image we have will be strikingly similar to those of others because we have been influenced by our shared cultural context – the time and place we inhabit and the prevailing values regarding the ideal body.

In our 21<sup>st</sup> century, North American culture the ideal body is thin. We know healthy bodies come in many shapes and sizes; nonetheless, most of us believe a thinner body is most desirable. This is partly a consequence of what others (parents, friends, acquaintances) have said to us about our own body. However, the most powerful influence on our thinking is the unbelievably thin bodies of the people portrayed in the mass media – in advertisements, magazines, movies, music videos, video games, etc. – all amplified by social media.

Media Smarts: Canada’s Centre for Digital and Media Literacy (2021) reports that “three-year-olds already prefer game pieces that depict thin people over those representing heavier ones”. Although no one actually looks like the airbrushed, Photoshopped thin people in the media, these images make most people anxious about their own bodies and increasingly inclined to body shaming, often directed at themselves (“I need to go on a diet!”) and in their comments about other people’s bodies (“Somebody should recommend an exercise program to them.”)

Debunking myths. Our culture’s obsession with thin has stoked many myths about size and weight. In an interview with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (2021), three doctors who care for people wanting help with weight management explain how myths about weight are both hurtful and unhelpful. Their goal is to change the conversation about weight, encourage acceptance of diversity in bodies, and change the culture around weight to emphasize the worth and self-esteem of all people.

The doctors discuss how misconceptions about weight have led us to the false assumption that larger people are to blame for their size and weight. Having a larger body is often seen, incorrectly, as a character flaw and a lack of perseverance. This attitude is captured in the glib slogan “Eat less, move more!”, which they often hear from doctors, suggesting



that a larger person just needs to make better choices in diet and exercise and be more disciplined about it.

Having a larger body is also seen, again incorrectly, as a moral failing and a lack of intelligence. Larger people are often accused of being gluttonous and lazy and being unaware of and unconcerned about their health. Others assume that a heavier person must inevitably be unhealthy.

The doctors emphasize that there is no necessary connection between having a larger, heavier body and poor health. A person's weight and body size, they explain, is influenced by many factors – physiological, chemical and biological (genetic endowment) – interacting in complex ways, unique to each individual. Not every person who has a larger, heavier body needs to lose weight, nor should they be made to feel obligated to do so. Some people do need and want help to manage their weight because it puts them at risk of developing a serious health problem or because it impedes their quality of life. In this case, the treatment plan must be carefully designed to meet the specific needs and goals of that person. And it begins with listening to their story and restoring their self-esteem.

Canadian doctors are beginning to learn about the complexity of body size and weight and how to open a conversation with patients in a manner that respects their dignity and worth. In the medical community, an acceptance of diversity in body size and weight – that bodies come in all shapes and sizes – is emerging. This is helping to change the conversation about size and weight, and doctors are hopeful that the media will play an important role in promoting this change more broadly in the community.

(Body Mass Index is a measure that is considered to be more harmful than helpful. See Appendix B below.)

Body respect. In the wider cyber world, many people are using the internet and social media to push back against the advertising industry and create a new narrative about the body, one that is more realistic, inclusive of diversity and spiritually nourishing, and thus, not merely a passing fashion, but something potentially more enduring.

Kessel (2018) traces the rise of this movement and the evolving language associated with it: “Body positivity first emerged in the US in the 60s to raise awareness of the barriers faced by fat people (and as a result, the word “fat” was reclaimed as a descriptor rather than an insult).” Later, “body neutrality” was embraced by those who found “loving their bodies” an uncomfortable idea and wanted simply to “find peace with them”. Writer Rebekah Taussig believes that “body neutrality” is a more comfortable fit for people with chronic pain or progressive conditions: “Those people are pretty frustrated with the demand to love their bodies when they feel betrayed by them. Being neutral could feel like a relief.” According to Dr. Laura Thomas, “[S]ome people call it ‘body respect’. It is: ‘I might not love every single patch of cellulite and belly roll, but I’m not going to punish myself.’”

Sonya Renee Taylor (2021) offers a passionate and moving poetic presentation, “The Body Is Not An Apology.” In the opening part of the poem Taylor expresses how “systems of oppression live inside us”...

Let it not be as common as oil, ash or toilet, The Body Is Not An Apology...  
Do not ask it to be pardoned as criminal, the body is not a crime, is not a gun, is not a lost set of keys, a wrong number dialed, it is not the orange burst of blood to shame white dresses, The Body Is Not An Apology.

Then later, there is a dramatic shift when Taylor invites us to see the body as “a gift to receive.”

Hosanna for the parts we have endeavoured to excise!...  
Praise for the mistake that never was!...  
Praise for the rising, like an obstinate Christ, for the salvation of a body that will bend like a baptismal bowl, for those who will worship at the lip of this sanctuary.  
Praise the body, for The Body Is Not An Apology!  
The body is Deity, the body is God! – the body is God!  
The only righteous love that will never need an apology.”

Taylor’s poem brings to mind 1 Corinthians 12: 12-27. We are called to be the Body of Christ. In this scripture reading, honouring and respecting the Body of Christ is analogous to honouring and respecting every aspect and part of one’s own body. We first must do this with our own bodies to fully understand how we can honour and respect all aspects of the Body of Christ; for we all make up the Body of Christ.

Inclusive language choices. We can show honour and respect by remembering to put the person first, not their size or weight. This applies to ourselves, too, because self-shaming is something we all do. We can stop shaming ourselves and focus on the qualities that make us unique:

**Preferred**

*People like my sense of humour.*

*I’m a talented musician.*

*body positivity, body neutrality, body respect*

**Not Preferred**

*Oh no! I’ve gained two pounds this week.*

*These pants used to fit me!*

*self-shaming language of any kind*

When we are about to comment on someone else’s body size or weight, it is important to remember that even a compliment can be a back-handed form of body shaming: “You look terrific in your new skinny jeans!” implies that before you lost weight, you did not look terrific. We can stop making any reference to another person’s body, avoiding pejorative adjectives like “overweight”, “obese”, “fat” \* and even others that seem less offensive, but are unnecessary. No one needs to be reminded they are “slender”, “thin”, “short”, “tall”, etc. We honour and respect others when we focus, instead, on the special gifts they contribute to our church:

### Preferred

*She is always there to lend a helping hand when you need one.*

*John is the person who led the wonderful service we had last Sunday.*

*I really appreciate the empathy they show when someone needs to share their feelings.*

*Your comments on the scripture reading were very thought-provoking.*

### Not preferred

*Someone should tell her she's too heavy to wear clothes with horizontal stripes.*

*John is the stout man in the blue shirt standing over there.*

*I wonder how they can eat like that and stay so slender?*

*Wow! You sure are a shorty, aren't you?*

\*As noted above, the word "fat" has been reclaimed by some people with larger bodies as a descriptor referring to themselves; however, its use by others to describe them would be insulting.

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## Economic Status

According to the United Church of Canada website, "a growing movement of senators, Anglican and Evangelical Lutheran bishops, and many more across Canada are calling for a universal basic income ... [also known as] a guaranteed livable income. The use of 'guaranteed' signals a focus on ensuring a level of income for all. The use of 'livable' signals an income that enables people to live with dignity, not just stay alive." (UCC, 2020)

It is important to recognize how wealth and education are often privileged and treated as socially, morally and spiritually superior. (MCC, 2017, p. 7)

Class discrimination is defined as "a biased or discriminatory attitude based on distinctions made between social or economic classes." (Rider University) Although this can happen between any class of people it is typically used to refer to people who aren't wealthy or privileged. We are called to recognize our own privileges and do our best to recognize the accomplishments and contributions of people who are experiencing poverty or who have a "lower" socioeconomic status. It is too easy to fall into privilege shaming by raising up, as the norm, the life experiences of those who are privileged. (Rider University)

### Preferred

*a person experiencing homelessness*

*a person experiencing poverty*

*a person living on an unsustainable*

*income - provide concrete facts*

*i.e., earns less than \$16436 - \$20389\**

*a year, depending on region in Canada;*

*minimum wage in Alberta is \$15\* but with*

*cost of living one needs \$17.36\* just to*

*make ends meet*

### Not Preferred

*the homeless*

*impoverished*

*low income*

*poor or poor person*

*needy*

*poverty-stricken; poverty-ridden*

*hobo*

*the less fortunate; the unfortunate*

*victims of their circumstances*

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*wisdom and knowledge from all  
of life experiences*

*\*(Corak, 2018)*

*\*(Omololu, 2021)*

*\*(Bartko, 2015)*

*the poorly educated; uneducated*

It is so important to think carefully about the details included in the messages we convey through our liturgy, prayers, sermons, announcements, newsletters, and reports. How are we representing people of limited means? Jesus' ministry was one of recognizing, revering and relating to people on the margins.

*The Beatitudes as recorded in Matthew 5: 3-12 and Luke 6: 20-22 are well known blessings expressed by Jesus. For people of today, a Re-Mix of the Beatitudes can be found on the "enfleshed" website. <https://enfleshed.com/pages/liturgy-library>*

Yet unintentionally, are there times we convey class-based assumptions? Is there potential to offend or demean people who are currently (or have previously experienced) poverty?

*For example: Psalm 40 closes with these words, "For troubles surround me – too many to count! My sins pile up so high I can't see my way out. They outnumber the hairs on my head. I have lost courage...As for me, since I am poor and needy, let the Lord keep me in his thoughts."*

*As is often the case, 'poor and needy' is equated to a desperate, downtrodden situation. Yet, the message of the psalm should not target one category of people, but be a message for all. Providing context and an alternate way of hearing and receiving the words would help avoid offending or demeaning anyone.*

*Another way to present the message could be – As for me, I am all messed up, I have nothing to offer. God, I need guidance and wisdom to change this all around. (adapted from the Message version of the Bible)*

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## Criminal Record

Although criminal record is not listed in our Affirming Faith Statement, we believe it is important to be more fully aware of how people with criminal convictions are shaped by social forces and the words we use that label them.

In the article, *The language of incarceration*, Alexander Cox points out “the stigmatizing effects of language [that] can negatively affect a person’s ability not only to participate fully in social life [but also] ... deprive people of their full personhood” (Sage Journals, 2020). Person first language would go a long way to destigmatize people who face political, social, and psychological consequences as a result of a label such as ‘criminal.’ Cox points out the importance of how our othering labels intersect and collide with classism, sexism and racism. Our role is more than to “humanize” because people who are, or have been, in prison are already human.

### Preferred

*refer to the individual by name*  
*formerly incarcerated individuals*  
*person in prison*  
*person on parole*  
*people with criminal convictions*  
*young person with justice system involvement*  
*person arrested for selling drugs*

### Not Preferred

*felons / ex-cons*  
*offenders*  
*convicts*  
*deviants*  
*criminals / predators*  
*juvenile delinquent*  
*a ‘juvie’*  
*drug lord/ drug runner/ mule/ drug pusher*  
*the keeper and the kept*

According to the author of the story in John 8: 1-11, *A Woman Caught in Adultery*, Jesus is very clear that we must first examine how free of ‘sin’ we are before we condemn someone else.

There are 7 stories of Jesus healing on the Sabbath. Jewish authorities claimed Jesus was breaking the Sabbath laws. Jesus challenged these laws, which were contrived to control others, by asking if it was against the Sabbath laws to do good; to save a life; to heal or rescue someone from harm. From Jesus perspective, all whom he healed (against the law) were viewed as a person first, not by how they were labeled and defined by the social forces of the time – harlot, tax collector, leper, widow, Samaritan.

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## **Implementation**

These guidelines will be made available for viewing on the website for Robert McClure United Church (RMUC). In addition, they will be kept on file in the policy folder of the Official Board. As a living document, the Official Board can review and recommend amendments as need arises.

All RMUC staff, Official Board members, Worship Committee members, Committee Chairs not on the Board, Licensed Lay Worship leaders and Small Group Ministry leaders will be provided with a digital copy of the guidelines. The Affirming Ministry Action Committee will provide educational opportunities for the congregation to become familiar with the guidelines and how everyone has a role in putting them into action.

It is recognized that we are not always going to ‘get it right’. Mistakes and missteps will be made. These are opportunities to adjust and grow.

In addition to expanding our verbal communications to be as inclusive as possible, the following link is offered as a resource for inclusive written communications.

### **Written Communication**

- [https://www.btb.termiumplus.gc.ca/tpv2guides/guides/wrtps/index-eng.html?lang=eng&lettr=indx\\_catlog\\_g&page=9tZXuAe4oZYs.html](https://www.btb.termiumplus.gc.ca/tpv2guides/guides/wrtps/index-eng.html?lang=eng&lettr=indx_catlog_g&page=9tZXuAe4oZYs.html)

## Appendix A

There are many respectful ways to ask someone about their pronouns.

Try: Sorry, I forgot to ask. I use they/them/theirs pronouns, how about you?

Can you remind me which pronouns you use?

If you are unsure of someone's pronouns, you can use their name in place of any pronoun: "Sam was feeling hungry, so Sam went to the Dairy Bar for a snack."

<u>Subjective</u>	<u>Objective</u>	<u>Possessive Adjective</u>	<u>Possessive Pronoun</u>	<u>Reflexive</u>
She laughed	I love her	Her eyes gleam	That is hers	She likes herself
He laughed	I love him	His eyes gleam	That is his	He likes himself
They laughed	I love them	Their eyes gleam	That is theirs	They like themselves
Ze* laughed	I love zir	Zir eyes gleam	That is zirs	Ze likes zirsself
Ae* laughed	I love aer	Aer eyes gleam	That is aers	Ae likes aersself

\*Ze/zir/zirs pronouns sound like zee, zur, zurs, etc. Ae/aer/aers pronouns sound like ay, air, airs, etc.

[from Rainbow Connection, University of Connecticut *Gender and Pronoun Guide*]

## Appendix B

Doctors are beginning to question the use of the Body Mass Index (BMI), which categorizes and labels people as "overweight" or "obese" based on their height and weight. Because it is based on only two factors – height and weight – and does not account for other significant influences on weight (gender, metabolism and muscle mass, to name just a few), it is too limited to be a scientifically valid or useful measure in treating people who want help to manage their weight. Apparently, there is nothing to be gained by labelling people with pejorative adjectives like "overweight" and "obese".

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In developing our “Guidelines for Inclusive Language” at Robert McClure United Church, we have been inspired by and have drawn upon the work of other faith communities and secular institutions listed below. We have adapted their work for our own church community. Where we have paraphrased their language or used direct quotations from their work, we have acknowledged this with specific references within our text.

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