



EQUIPPING FOR... WORSHIP

Worship Words: Discipling Language for Faithful Ministry¹

Produced by Canadian Ministries

Each of us has a name given by our parents and given by our friends...

Each of us has a name given by our stature and our face and given by what we wear...

Each of us has a name given by our sins and given by our longing...

Each of us has a name given by our life and given by our death...

Each of us has a secret name written on a white stone known now only to God (Rev. 2:17)...

Adapted by Ron Rienstra from a poem written by the Jewish poet Zelda

All of our names have meaning. The variety of names we receive in our life, from the names we are given at birth to all those we collect along the way, say something about who we are and how we are connected to the world around us. Some names build us up and show us that we are loved; other names tear us down and diminish our sense of worth. Our experience of this in our own lives shows us that words have great power.

In the context of our faith, words are a vehicle through which we come to know and experience God. Yet, as ministry leaders, we often turn to the same images, metaphors and standard turns of phrase for our language of worship. Think for a moment: how many names for God do you use regularly? Probably only two or three. In the Bible, however, there are literally hundreds of names and images used to describe God.



At the pre-Assembly workshop offered by the Life and Mission Agency, *Worship Words: Discipling Language for Faithful Ministry*, Ron Rienstra invited participants to explore the full breadth of faith-building language that Christianity offers. By paying careful attention to words we say, not only in sermons, but also in prayers, songs and every other spoken

1. This *Equipping for Worship* is based on the work of Debra and Ron Rienstra in their book *Worship Words: Discipling Language for Faithful Ministry* (Baker Academic, 2009). In June 2017, the Rev. Ron Rienstra, Associate Professor of Preaching and Worship Arts, led a pre-General Assembly workshop on behalf of Canadian Ministries on the language of worship. This document is a summary of two of his key points from the conference along with accompanying exercises. We are grateful to Ron Rienstra for sharing his work with us. Please pick up the Rienstras' book for more details.

“The *Worship Words* workshop with Ron Rienstra deepened my awareness of the formative nature of worship for both children and adults. We can intentionally teach congregations about what we are doing in worship through the language we use. This is increasingly important to keep in mind in our post-Christian culture: there are always people for whom worship is a new activity.”

– The Rev. Paddy Eastwood

element in worship, we help others to discern God’s character more fully and experience God’s presence more powerfully.

In this *Equipping for Worship*, we will share two of Rienstra’s key ideas and accompanying exercises that will help you as a ministry leader expand your worship vocabulary. We hope that, in turn, those worshipping alongside you will develop a more expansive vision of God and a fuller language of devotion.

Naming God: Meeting the One Who Is

“Unfortunately, human nature is such that we emphasize names and images for God that reflect who we *wish* God to be, neglecting the less comfortable aspects (for us) of who God *is*” (148).

What names for God do you find yourself turning to again and again?

Are there any names for God that make you uneasy?

There is no perfect language for talking about God. As soon as we start to name God in one way, our vision narrows and we risk missing out on the fullness of the divine. Worship leaders need to be aware that, in our congregations, each person will have their preferred ways of understanding and addressing God. We all have unique personal, social and familial

Remembering that language not only reflects our thinking, but also shapes it, ministry leaders should take great care to use inclusive language. Follow this link to find the PCC’s Inclusive Language Guidelines: <http://presbyterian.ca/resources/resource-finder/download-info/canadian-ministries-guidelines-use-inclusive-language/>

histories that cause us to react differently to the language of worship. Thankfully, when we get to know the Bible and are intentional in using the diverse images contained within it, we make space for worshippers to take joy in the familiar but also grow in their understanding of God.

The language of worship forms us as disciples. The more we are exposed to different images and names for God, the more we are able to imagine the splendor of God. This shapes how we live. For example, if we focus on God as “Healer,” we become open to recognizing our brokenness and the possibility of being made whole. All of the biblical images of God, even the more challenging ones, have something to teach us about the way God is active in our lives and the world.

Exercise #1 (from *Worship Words*, pgs. 149 & 171)

What are the images for God most common in your imagination? In what ways might the Bible expand your common images?

The Psalms are a good place to start to expand your imagery of God. Here are some examples:

- Lord, the most high (Psalm 7:17)
- My rock (Psalm 28:1)
- O, Holy One of Israel (Psalm 71:22)
- Lover of Justice (Psalm 99:4)
- A shield around me (Psalm 3:3)
- My light (Psalm 27:1)
- Help in trouble (Psalm 46:1)
- Keeper (Psalm 121:5)



Exercise #2 (from *Worship Words*, pg. 172)

Choose any psalm that you know and love. Explore a name for God in order to shape a prayer. Choose one image from the psalm, and write a prayer in which you name God in terms of the image, then expand the image in praying for the congregation and the world. Remember to speak this image in light of the gospel.

Example based on Psalm 23:

God, you are a faithful shepherd to us. You know each of us by name, and love us with a fierce, protective love. We ask you to tend the wounds of those who are sick and grieving today, especially... We ask you to comfort those who are fearful today, fearful of... We ask you to protect those who are in danger today... Many people in this world do not know your voice. We pray that you will continue to call them. Let your Spirit speak to them through the church...

**Watch Your Figures:
Theological Metaphors**

“As we pray, so we love. The God described in our love songs becomes our picture of the God we love” (p. 145).

How would you fill in the blank?

God is like _____.

Do your answers to the above question inspire you to love God more fully? If so, how?

Many of the words we use in worship have become so familiar that we no longer experience the full impact of their meaning. When this happens, our capacity to enter into the awe and wonder of Christian faith is diminished. Our faith is one of glorious mysteries that are not easily captured in language. When used properly, metaphors help us approach these mysteries by describing the indescribable aspects of God and faith through familiar images.

Rienstra boldly states that “figurative speech is perhaps the most powerfully formative tool we have to shape the beliefs, practices, and passions of the worshiping assembly” (p. 116). One way to help worshippers move beyond a basic understanding of theological concepts is by inviting them to engage their spiritual imaginations through the use of metaphor. Think about some of the common metaphors we use to describe the building blocks of faith: sin and salvation, life and death, the Kingdom of God... Now, take a closer look at the first one. Consider the many ways that people experience sin and salvation in the world and in their lives. To do so, ask yourself, what is wrong with the world? And, how do we make it better?

Living a life of faith, which requires we believe in things that can’t be easily grasped, can be difficult. Intentionally diversifying the metaphors we use,

“Much of my ministry has involved including children in worship. When I lead our annual worship course, which ends with a service planned and led by the children, I include in the weekly bulletin a description of the aspect of worship the children are studying that week as well as questions for reflection. It is amazing how the adults appreciate learning about worship and reflecting on their own worship of God.”

– The Rev. Paddy Eastwood



without using too many during the same service (Rienstra recommends sticking with 1 or 2 maximum!), not only offers worshippers new ways of thinking and speaking about their faith but also new ways of living it out. We attend to the dynamics of sin and salvation in our lives differently when we look at them through the metaphorical lenses of

out of tune/harmony, drowning/lifesaver, frenzy/rest, lost/found, anxiety/contentment, addiction/recovery, injustice/justice.

Exploring the language of faith is a lifelong process of discovery. We hope that the exercises here provide you with inspiration for your own journey into developing a deeper language of faith and a stronger love for God.

Exercise #3 (from *Worship Words*, pg. 140)

During a church service you attend, observe language for sin/salvation. Were any definitions given? Were metaphors used? Keep notes, and after the service summarize what picture of sin/salvation a worshipper might come away with.

Exercise #4 (from *Worship Words*, pgs. 127 & 140)

What are some of the metaphors we use to describe the Kingdom of God? What pictures do worshippers receive of God's purpose and goal for their lives and for the world from these metaphors?

There are many biblical metaphors of the Kingdom of God. Here are some examples:

- A Pearl of Great Value (Matthew 13:45)
- Buried Treasure (Matthew 13:44)
- God's Dream for the World (Isaiah 35 and Revelations 21)
- A Great Banquet (Luke 14:15-24)

We are extremely grateful for Ron Rienstra's leadership at the conference. The ideas presented in this *Equipping for Worship* can be found in Debra and Ron Rienstra's book *Worship Words: Discipling Language for Faithful Ministry* (Baker Academic, 2009). Many thanks also to the Rev. Paddy Eastwood for compiling the information used in this resource and offering a first-person account of her experience at the conference.

Canadian Ministries wants to hear from you!

What parts of this resource are most useful? Share your story of worship. Recommend a resource! Make a suggestion or ask a question!

Contact us at canadianministries@presbyterian.ca or call 416-441-1111 or 1-800-619-7301 Ext. 271. Find more great ministry ideas through our weekly Facebook post *Take it Up Tuesday*. Follow us on Facebook at facebook.com/pccconnect.