



When God Is a Guy

Rachel Hackenberg

Managing Editor, Faith-Forming Publications & Pilgrim Press and
Team Leader, Justice and Local Church Ministries

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness." So God created humankind ... in the image of God. (Genesis 1:26-27, NRSV)

I grew up on the formal liturgies and hymns of the Evangelical and Reformed tradition, with phrases like *Thee* and *Thou* and *Hearken* and *O Most Merciful Father* and *The King Is Drawing Nigh*. God was a guy: a father, a king, a male shepherd, a strong (read: masculine) defender, the husband of the Church. The Church's use of masculine language for God was knit into my faith as a child.

But the Church's use of masculine imagery and language for the Divine hasn't done the world any favors. It's not done our faith any favors, either.

Masculine God imagery is ambivalent at best – and intentional at worst – as an accomplice of sexism and gender-based violence. God the King and God the Father do more to reinforce patriarchy's injustices than to disrupt them. God as a guy doesn't help the Church envision leadership in the flesh of a woman (cis and trans) or in the being of a non-binary leader. Boy God curtails God's own diversity – the clucking hen God, the giving birth God, the fluttering bird God, the non-gendered "their" God who said, "Let us make humankind in our likeness."

It's all a metaphor, of course. I don't know anyone who believes that the Eternal Mystery we call "God" has the genitals of a cis human male. Nevertheless, when God is a guy even metaphorically, the impact is tangible.

When God is a guy, a denomination such as the UCC with more women than men among its active ordained ministers (51.7% female to 48.1% male in 2019) nevertheless exhibits bias in its hiring of executive ministerial leaders (41.3% female to 58.1% male solo/senior pastors in 2019). Source: [2019 UCC Statistical Profile](#).

When God is a guy, the Church demonstrates a preference for men at the helm of theological education, with the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) noting that women hold only 13% of the CEO positions in ATS-affiliated schools. Source: [2018 ATS Women in Leadership Survey](#).

When God is a guy, women are perceived as less knowledgeable, less capable, less deserving of self-determination than men. (Perhaps you've noticed the loss of viable female candidates in the U.S. presidential nomination process.) Worldwide, 9 out of 10 persons are biased against women in areas of political, education, economics, and physical well-being. Source: [2020 UNDP Gender Social Norms Index](#).

When God is a guy, the divine likeness in women and non-gendered persons is made secondary – in our Bibles, in our liturgies, in our leadership. Our masculine God-language isn't solely responsible for gender inequality, however it is not exempt from our critical examination of the ways it shapes our faith, our thought, and our action.

Maybe you don't believe God is a guy. Nevertheless, the Church continues to struggle with a glass ceiling (and a glass cliff).

Maybe you love your mama, your sister, your daughter, and you celebrate their strength. Nevertheless, approximately 50,000 women were killed in 2017 by intimate partners or family members. Source: www.unwomen.org.

Maybe you celebrate your female or non-binary pastor, and you respect their authority. Nevertheless, in this U.S. presidential season, we will not elect a woman to the highest office of government.

When God is a guy, the image of God is harmed. When God is a guy, our communities are harmed. So long as God is a guy, gender justice will evade us.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rachel Hackenberg is Managing Editor, Faith-Forming Publications & Pilgrim Press and Team Leader in Justice and Local Church Ministries for the United Church of Christ.

LEARN ucc.org/justice

DONATE ucc.org/donate

ARCHIVE
 bit.ly/witness4justice

The United Church of Christ has more than 5,000 churches throughout the United States. Rooted in the Christian traditions of congregational governance and covenantal relationships, each UCC setting speaks only for itself and not on behalf of every UCC congregation. UCC members and churches are free to differ on important social issues, even as the UCC remains principally committed to unity in the midst of our diversity.