

Shaping your Youth Ministry Language

“But if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought.”
—George Orwell, 1984

As Presbyterians, we often call ourselves “people of the Word.” We do so because we believe words matter—the Word of God read and proclaimed is an essential part of who we are as Reformed Christians. We also believe our words matter. Over the years, youth ministry has used certain words that, for better or for worse, have become our common language. However, certain words we use in ministry, whether we realize it or not, can hinder rather than help what we are called to do. This Quicksheet will reflect on some common words we use in our work with youth and ask whether these are really the best words to use. On this sheet you will also find suggestions for different words to use, as well as a few quick tips to bring the language of youth ministry to light in your congregation.

Word #1: Program

“We have a great youth **program**” is a statement many people make, but what does “program” mean? Webster’s dictionary defines *program* as “a plan of things that are done in order to achieve a specific result” and “the performance of a program.” Ministry is not solely about achieving results. Nor is it a performance, either by youth or their leaders. Teach your youth and your congregation that you are a “**ministry**”—and an important one, too. Tell them you are about changing lives and hearts through our Savior, Jesus Christ. Tell them youth are not spectators of God’s work, but are actively engaged in listening and responding to God’s call to be the hands and feet of Jesus. “Program” is limiting. It just says *what* we do, but it doesn’t offer *why* we do what we do. When we think of our work with youth as a “ministry” instead of a “program” our ministry may actually shape itself into what Christ is calling us to do and to be.

Other words to consider: *Ministry!* (Really, it may be the best word to use!)

Tip: The most important thing to do is call our work with youth a “ministry” rather than a “program.” With that on our hearts and minds, we will look at all we do through the lens of helping our youth know Christ and make Christ known. Tell the congregation, including the youth, that you are intentional about using the word

“ministry” in your work with youth. Use “ministry” in language, on social media and the Web page, in publications, announcements, and titles. It may be the strongest word you can use!

Word #2: Student

In the past decade or two, the word “youth” is disappearing from ministries and being replaced with “student” as in “Student Ministries.” Yes, our young people are students, and yes, that is a significant role they play in their young years, but is that their defining word? To label our ministry after a part of who they are seems to be a disservice to them. By calling our youth “students” first, have we not already put being a student above being a follower of Christ? Would we ever call someone a “student Christian?” Ministry opportunities with youth often take second, third, or fourth seat after their “student” activities. Addressing them as students first says that’s mostly how we see them too. This isn’t to diminish the importance of their education, but when it comes to church, there are words we ought to use to refer to our young people before “student.”

Other words to consider: *Youth* (a classic), *teens*, *young disciples*

Tip: Have your youth brainstorm every name that they are called (e.g., teen, student, youth, child, young adult, etc.). Ask them to think about each name and list the positives and negatives associated with that name. Then ask them if some words on the list are better than others. Have a discussion about how they prefer the congregation to refer to them and why it matters. The church needs to embrace our young disciples (hey, new words!) for all that they are, and that includes finding words to refer to them that do not limit them to only one role they play.

Word #3: Study

The word “study” means something different to a young person. Because being a student is a big part of their lives, to study means learning or memorizing something in order to produce answers for an exam or essay. To call a Bible discussion a “study” might be hindering our young people’s enthusiasm to encounter the Scriptures. Also, it’s important to remember that very few young people want to come to church to have a school-like experience with the Bible. They want to engage in Scripture, but not the same way they engage in math. Encountering the biblical text is transformational and life-giving. It is that way not because we “study” it, but because the Holy Spirit moves through these words and into the hearts of our young people to reveal who God is and who we are in relation to our loving Creator.

Other words to consider: *Bible talk*, *digging into Scripture*, *Bible encounter*, *scriptural engagement*, *devotional*, *dive into the text*, *exegete* (exegesis), *Sunday discipleship* (in lieu of “Sunday school”)

Tip: Using creative names for your Scripture meeting or changing the location for your gathering can often help youth feel less anxious about a “study.” Meet at a restaurant for dessert or at a coffee shop. If you are focusing on a particular book of Scripture, look for a theme to name your event after or create a Bible talk based on texts that have some connection.

Word #4: Fun

The major issue with this word is not that we use it, but that we tend to use it first. For example:

“Youth group needs to be more fun.”
“If youth group isn’t fun, I’m not going.”
“Did you have fun serving at the homeless shelter?”
“Come to this youth conference ... it’s really fun!”

“Fun” can become an idol in ministry quickly. Whether it’s to keep up a high attendance or to eliminate the perception that youth ministry is boring, “fun” can often begin to take priority in youth ministry for the wrong reasons. We all know young people need a place in ministry to let go and enjoy being with each other, but we must keep the call to follow Christ at the center of it all. Fun can be (when appropriate) a product of what we do in ministry, but it should not be a focal point of our ministry.

Other words to use: As stated above, it’s OK to have fun and to call your meeting fun, just don’t let it be your first word. Make sure that youth know the most important things happening when the group gathers are growing in faith in Jesus and learning what it means to be a community of God’s people.

Tip: Send home with youth or email parents a list of questions for parents to ask their youth after they return from a trip or event. Make sure the questions engage youth in dialogue beyond yes and no answers. Since parents aren’t always present at your youth events, they simply don’t know what to ask. Help them by providing questions to ask and they too will see that youth ministry is so much more than just “fun.” You can also send parents a quick summary of their child’s experience at youth group. Include a couple of key takeaways from the night along with follow-up questions for them to ponder. By crafting the right questions for the occasion, you can do this even for a “fun” event like bowling, a lock-in or camp.

Word #5: Fundraise

It's no secret that ministry with youth is expensive! For ages we've responded quickly by hosting a fundraiser or multiple fundraisers. Here are three major reasons this word shouldn't be used.

1. Very few (if any) other ministries in the congregation are asked to fundraise as much as youth ministries are. Rarely, if ever, do we see a "fellowship ministry fundraiser" or an "evangelism fundraiser." Requiring fundraisers, whether intentionally or unintentionally, says that the congregation doesn't value this particular ministry enough to fully support it as it does for other ministries.
2. When youth are asked to spend time "fundraising" they are losing "ministry" time. What percentage of youth ministry (in terms of time, effort, resources, people power, etc.) should be spent raising funds for the times when we actually do ministry?
3. Many fundraisers require menial work. While there are good, holy lessons to be learned in that kind of work, it can lead the congregation to believe youth are only good to do a particular type of work for the church that others would never see themselves doing.

If congregations can look for other ways of financially supporting our youth ministries, the less time youth will spend raising money and the more time they will spend enacting their ministry.

Tip: Add up the numbers. Calculate how much it costs each youth to participate in your ministry if he or she were to attend every event you offer. If you have weekly meals youth must pay for, include it! List retreats, recreational outings, T-shirts, everything! If it comes out of their pocket, add it up and see what that total is. Then compare the percentage of what youth families pay out of pocket to how much support they receive from the congregational budget. Share this information with teaching and ruling elders in your congregation so they can see what your realistic costs of ministry are per person. Remind them also that there may be young people who aren't able to participate in the ministry because their families are unable to pay for all these events. Ask them to look for ways for young people to get the financial support they need without taking away ministry time.

This set of words is just for starters! By reading this, perhaps you will think of other words in your youth ministry language that need to be rethought or emphasized more. Remember, words shape us for better or worse. Use them wisely!

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