

Justice Peace Links

Justice and Peace Committee – Churchwide Coordinating Team – Presbyterian Women

2011 • Issue 2

Words Matter!

Introduction

Do you have a story about a time when you noticed the power of words? Most of us do. The Words Matter project is an invitation to investigate those stories, telling your own story and hearing the stories of others, to see what we can learn about what is at stake in the words we use. If we want to work for justice and peace, we must start close at home—with our very words.

Words can hurt, words can heal, and words shape our realities, coloring the ways we experience the world. They are the tools we use to interpret our experiences, to relate to one another, and to build a relationship with God. As part of us, words also participate in sinful systems of oppression and dominance. We can easily re-inscribe racism, sexism, able-ism and others without meaning to, in fact, without even noticing.

Words Matter is an ecumenical project to reinvigorate deeper conversations about the power of our words. Words Matter does not promote *compliance* to a list of “politically correct” terms; rather it encourages participants to get to know one another and think about the words they use together—building *commitment* to using words in ways that lift up the body of Christ.

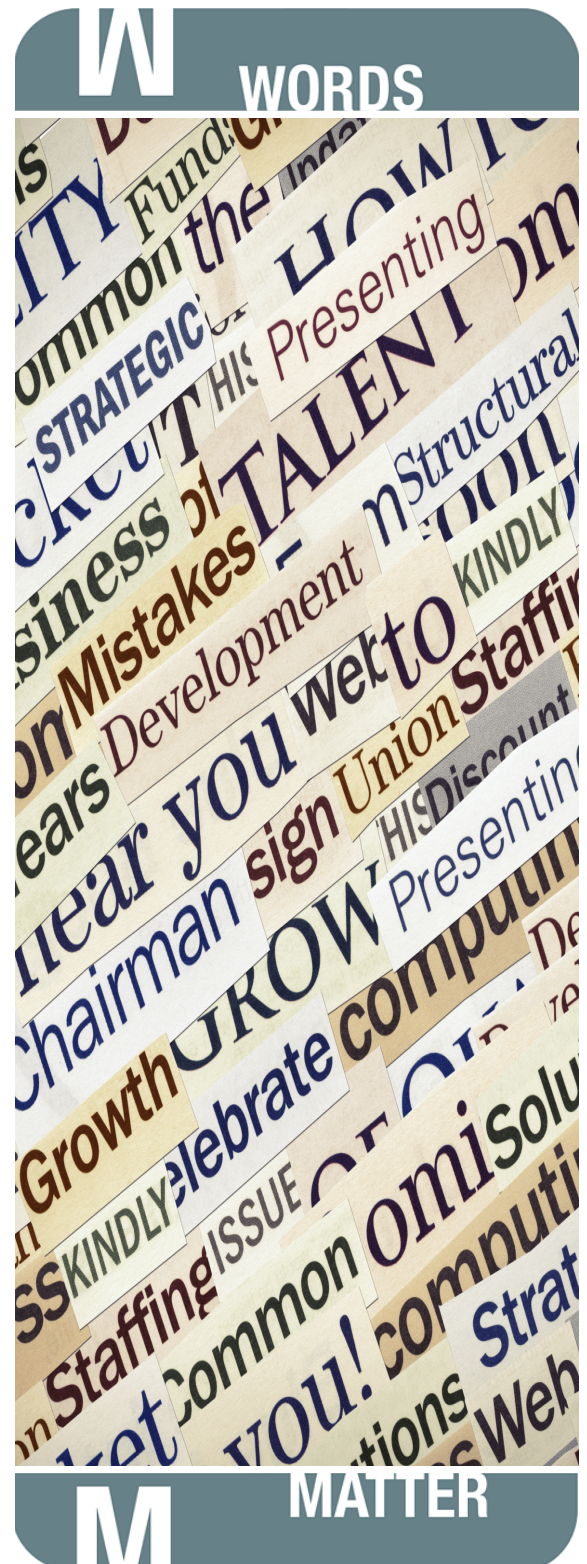
Stories

What follows are three stories about the importance of words from three very different points of view. Each of the writers is responding to the prompt: Tell the story of a time you noticed the importance of words.

Ruth

The last nine years of my teaching career I worked as a music teacher for students with learning disabilities in the District of Columbia public schools. This was one of the most memorable times of my teaching career. There were 13 students in each class, ranging from ages 5–19. I felt very blessed that these students would talk to me during their lunch time about their family life situations. I would always try to encourage them to be the best that they could be. Some would say, “Mrs. Lowe, they tease us because we ride the ‘cheese bus’ (special school bus).” I told them, “You are riding. The ones who are teasing you are walking.” These words would always get big smiles.

I attended music educators’ conferences annually and took advantage of every opportunity to open new possibilities for my



students. I learned that one of the conferences I attended was offering grants that could fund the purchase of musical instruments. I wrote the proposal with hope, but did not think any more about it once submitted. One day I received a call from a colleague with some miraculous words. The voice on the phone said, “Congratulations, you have been selected as a grant recipient. You have also been selected to speak at our executive committee meeting at the next conference!” All I could say was “Thank you, God!”

After arriving at the conference, I was directed to the executive committee meeting room. There were about 1,100 people present, and the committee and the attendees at this conference were predominately Caucasian (I am African-American). The executive committee members were seated in the first row of the room. The situation was very intimidating, and I was losing the courage to speak. I said to myself, “Oh my God, if I ever needed you, I need you now.”

My Creator gave me the strength to speak with confidence, and as a result of my speech, those words that I had prayed for God to give me, the grant was increased for the next recipients! This was a real blessing for my students and me. I could not stop praising God!

Ruth Mason Lowe
PW CCT Justice and Peace Committee Member

David

In the choir room of the church where I grew up, there was once a sign that read, “Peace on earth and good will to men.” Someone had scratched through the word “men” and had written in the word “ALL.” As a child at Saturday morning choir rehearsals, I remember pondering this “writing on the wall.”

I was blessed to learn the stories of scripture and songs of Christian faith among a congregation attuned to the power of words to convey—and sometimes contradict—the good news of the gospel. In college I studied linguistic anthropology, fascinated by the ways in which language shapes human communities and living traditions. From there I went to seminary, cultivating a special sensitivity to the use of language in scripture, liturgy, and theology, and the potential of words to hurt and heal. I was ordained to ministry in a church wrestling intensely with issues of inclusive and expansive language. As we discerned and discovered together how to pray and what to sing, we spent a lot of time talking about “changing the words.”

After a few years with that congregation, I began Ph.D. work in liturgical studies, concentrating in the area of liturgical language. My dissertation focuses on the language of lament in Christian worship—among other things, how such prayer can provide a voice for those who are suffering, excluded or oppressed. I now serve in the Office of Theology and Worship of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), where I am a denominational representative to the Consultation on Common Texts, the group that created the Revised Common Lectionary and continues to seek common language for Christian worship.

Looking back, I’m grateful for that bit of godly graffiti in the church choir room. I recognize it now as a prologue to my ministry

What Does Our Church Say?

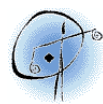
Our denomination has taken repeated action to affirm the importance of inclusive and expansive language and promote its use in worship, education, publications, and theological and biblical reflection. Here are a few highlights:

- 1979 GA 191 received the paper “The Power of Language Among the People of God and the Language about God” and commended its use to the church as a resource document.
- 1985 GA 197 adopted “Definitions and Guidelines on Inclusive Language.”
- 1998 GA 210 asked moderators of governing bodies to renew their commitment to “Definitions and Guidelines” and the Advocacy Committee for Women’s Concerns requested that the Office of Theology and Worship assess the current status of the church on inclusive language policy.
- 2000 GA 212 reaffirmed “Definitions and Guidelines on Inclusive Language” and requested the Office of Theology and Worship make it available churchwide.
- 2010 GA219 directed the Office of Theology, Worship and Education, the Compassion, Peace and Justice ministry areas, and the Racial Ethnic and Women’s Ministries/Presbyterian Women ministry area to renew efforts throughout the denomination to promote the use of inclusive and expansive language and to distribute the brochure “Well Chosen Words: Inclusive Language with Reference to the People of God—Expansive Language with Reference to God.”

What Does the Bible Say?

Genesis 1:1–5

“In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. And God saw that the light was



and, for me, a prophetic message, scrawled in pencil. As disciples of Jesus Christ—God’s Word made flesh—we are called to read between the lines, listen to voices from the margins, rewrite exclusive and oppressive stories, and to proclaim the good news of the gospel: God’s gift of grace and peace for all.

David Gambrell, associate for worship
Office of Theology and Worship, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

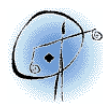
Unzu

I am a native of Korea and, to my understanding, my maternal grandfather came up with two names for me, and one of them was chosen by a family vote. My given name is made up of two Chinese characters, phonetically written in Korean as 은 and 주. The first character means “blessed” and the second character means “pearl.” The Korean naming practice that my family employed gave them freedom to give me a name that did two things: 1. My name was their faithful interpretation of my birth. By choosing the character “blessed,” they received me as a blessing from God, and they blessed me. 2. By choosing the character “pearl,” they expressed their appreciation of me as being precious and beautiful. I am blessed to have a family who took such care in naming me. However, as much as I appreciate the care they have taken in giving me this name, I cannot deny the fact that “I was made a female,” put into the stereotypically female categories of “beautiful” and “precious,” by their giving me this name. In other words, I was engendered.

I grew up in a Christian family. The word 하나님 (Ha-na-nim, meaning a deity in heaven) is most likely the word I heard most frequently next to mother and father. We were steeped in Christian spirituality. But this name was so intangible, so incomprehensible. To whom does this name belong? I was not sure. (In fact, I am still unsure most of the time.)

After making many detours, I ended up at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1985. In that fall, I took Hebrew. Every week, we took a quiz, and I earned low scores. I was ashamed. Hebrew intimidated me. But then, one day, I experienced an explosion in my consciousness when I was doing a word analysis of YHWH, the name for God used in the Old Testament. I interpreted the name into “I will be whomever I will be.” Some may be bothered by the nuance and indefiniteness of this name, but for me, it was most liberating. I could LOVE God who refused to be defined by human language that is a product of patriarchal culture. It was exhilarating to meet this God whose name was YHWH. With that experience, as far as I am concerned, my God was liberated from human language, and I was liberated from patriarchal definitions of God. My God is a verb, ever evolving, transgressing all human categories. This experience remains a critical memory in my God consciousness and faith journey. By the way, I received an A in Hebrew at the end of that fall semester.

Unzu Lee, program associate
Presbyterian Women



good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness [God] called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.”

John 1:1–4

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.”

Questions for Discussion

1. In these two beginning stories, words play a major role. What do words do?
2. In *John 1*, Jesus is referred to as “the Word.” What does this mean to you in your personal faith journey?
3. What do these two passages teach us about the power of our words and how we might use them?

Get Involved

Download the Words Matter conversation guide at www.WordsMatter.org and start a conversation in your circle, PWC, PWP, PWS, and beyond!

Get your own copy of “Well Chosen Words” and distribute it in your circle and church. “Well Chosen Words” is available for free download at <http://allwomen.pcusa.org/pdf/wellchosedwords.pdf>, or you may order it from Presbyterian Distribution Service (PDS), toll-free 800/524-2612, or the PC(USA) online Church Store, <http://store.pcusa.org>, item [PDS #7283905003](http://store.pcusa.org), free plus shipping and handling.

Order a copy of Definitions and Guidelines on Inclusive Language from PDS or the online Church Store, item [PDS #70420001003](http://store.pcusa.org), \$1.25 plus shipping and handling.

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