

Year-long Themes for Educational Ministries

Christian education for the year, usually re-organizing in fall, means more than a catchy phrase or yearly theme. However when a congregation spends time identifying faith formation goals and educational values, memorable words and illustrations can help the church interpret their ministry within the church and the community. A yearly theme, united with a strong vision and dynamic plan for how the faith community will grow and learn together, strengthens a congregation's focus and helps it fulfill its purpose.

Here are a few themes to consider with suggestions of educational values they may represent and plans for supporting the theme with goals. Find an artist in your congregation to create a logo for the theme.

Age to Age

If one of the goals of your congregation is to create better connections between generations of learners and leaders, consider this theme for the year. These words represent a variety of theological images: God's faithfulness to each generation; one generation passing faith to another; all ages enjoying one another and learning from each other.

Make plans for more intergenerational experiences, not only craft time at special events, but opportunities for children and youth to worship, study, and work alongside adults, for youth to talk to and be inspired by older adults sharing their faith stories and questions, and for adults and youth to be in the mutual ministry of nurturing of children. Create conversation starters for the tables at fellowship events. Arrange for children and youth to interview adults about their experiences of God at work in their lives. Celebrate faith and life milestones as a congregation. Publish a book of these memories. Invite prayer partnerships across generations. Institute internships for children and youth to be trained in service and witness for the church: communion preparation, sanctuary cleaning, offering collection, visitation of members and more.

Faith for a Lifetime

This theme emphasizes God at work in our lives from the beginning to the ending and God helping us live faithful, abundant lives here and now, each moment of every day. With constant time and social pressures, this theme helps a congregation lift up the

importance of balance over burnout, quality over quantity. It implies strong roots and nurturing support for all of life.

Evaluate the schedule and purpose of all events at and for the church. Ask questions about how this schedule and these ministries encourage and nurture lifelong faith. In what ways do the things we do together as a faith community strengthen this body of Christ? Do our plans reflect our goals for inside the church and beyond the church for sustaining lifetime faith and faithfulness? Depending on the answers to these questions, consider changes as needed. Offer faith formation that is foundational from birth to eternity. Offer the basics of Bible study and theological reflection to in-depth study of Scripture and the Sacraments. Engage the senses, the head, the heart, and the hands each time people are at church and in service to others.

Serve the Lord with Gladness

Gratitude for God's goodness and joy in faithful service may be an important yearlong goal for some congregations. Struggling finances, declining attendance, loss of purpose and other factors may cause a church to lose sight of God's gifts and blessings. The sheer act of thanksgiving in all things, big and small, may lead a congregation to be a better witness in the world today.

Each and every time people come together for study, worship, fellowship, or service make a plan and celebrate. These do not need to be elaborate plans or celebrations, but intentional ones. Consider hospitality. Will people feel welcome? Do they have the information they need to find their way, to join in, to be comfortable, and to know they are welcome to come again? Review spaces and places inside and outside the church. Are they clean, well kept, and accessible? Does our care for our building and grounds show in ways that show gratefulness or burden? Does our church care for people more? Offer sustenance in small and big ways. Provide light refreshments as appropriate, even if only coffee, tea, or water to drink. Plan times to share joys and concerns. Invite people to interact on a more personal level each time they are together. Model grateful praise and thanksgiving at church events with litanies, prayers, and songs. Invite members and visitors to frequently share where God is at work in their lives. Offer opportunities for testimony to God's faithfulness in church. Collect faith stories and make a devotional book for Advent or Lent. Celebrate God's creation and creativity in the world and in others. Welcome diversity.

We Believe

This theme, inspired by the title of our denominational curriculum from Congregational Ministries Publishing (CMP), expresses a church's hope to encourage

members of all ages to explore their Reformed faith tradition through Scripture, catechism, creeds, and confessions in new ways. It implies that one purpose of the church is to equip members to articulate their faith with words, but also to live and express their beliefs with actions. *We Believe*, as a theme for the year, is not intended to imply a uniformed checklist of faith statements and accomplishments that all must believe or attain, but a corporate commitment to wrestle with the mysteries, wonders, and questions of faith.

A congregation, striving to strengthen foundations of faith, may want to launch a yearlong reading and experience of the Bible as a whole church through personal devotion and corporate worship. Establish a Bible 101 for new believers and a Bible in-depth for veterans of the faith. Use biblically based, Reformed curriculum for children and youth. Plan studies of theological terms—grace, redemption, sin, forgiveness, covenant—with all ages and identify theological concepts—sovereignty of God, the Trinity, priesthood of believers—in conversation, worship, and service. Ask and struggle with faith questions in respectful ways, showing an openness to learn and grow.

Grow Christ's Church Deep and Wide

The 219th General Assembly reaffirmed the commitment to encourage congregations to grow in depth of faith expression and to reach out to a wider world in four ways: evangelism, discipleship, servanthood, and diversity. Adopt this theme for the year if your church is ready to concentrate on growth in one or more of these areas.

Spend some time evaluating your congregation's strengths and establishing a focus for the year; plan ministry around this commitment. If your congregation needs encouragement to reach out to others, focus on storytelling and evangelism training tools. If discipleship is an area for needed growth, teach and preach stories of Jesus disciples and identify present day disciples in your church. Plan an emphasis on spiritual practices and formative faith experiences. If servanthood is an area to grow, plan daily, weekly, monthly, or yearlong mission and service projects. Identify daily acts of kindness as faith expressions. Study what justice looks like and how church lives it out in big and small ways. If diversity is the focus, identify and celebrate diversity in your midst and in your neighborhood. Encourage members to step outside comfort zones and to embrace differences. Create an atmosphere of respect for others and provide tools for witnessing in meaningful ways.

A better suggestion:

Gather a creative group of people and brainstorm goals and create a vision for the coming year. Develop your ideas into a theme and plans for quality ministry all year.