

Chapter Four



Vote for Kids: A Thematic Approach

Grace Church
Edina, Minnesota

Your family just moved to the south side of Minneapolis and, because of its reputation, you're encouraged to visit Grace Church of Edina. As you pull off France Avenue, you struggle to locate a parking space. But once inside, the information booth is easy to spot. A warm receptionist guides you and your children to their classes. Hallways are crowded as the second of four worship services is about to begin. Then, standing above the crowd, is an eight-foot character who appears to be Uncle Sam. He greets your children; they giggle. He hands them each a button and says, "Vote for Kids."

Vote for Kids was one of the annual themes used by the children's department at Grace Church. Since God loves children, and since it was an election year, children's pastor Walt Pitman chose that theme to promote the children's work among the congregation. In fact, Walt himself played the character of Uncle Sam. "SAM" is an acronym for "Share A Ministry." The hallways were all decked out with red, white, and blue flyers stressing the importance of children's ministry. Walt Pitman tells us more about this thematic approach to recruitment and their Christian education ministry.

Our Philosophy

++++++

When we promote the needs of our children’s ministry, we want to have a positive image among our congregation. I’ve come to the conclusion that the majority of people want to be part of something that is positive. People respond to something that is significant, something that will make an impact on their lives.

For this reason, each year we center our recruitment efforts around a theme. I don’t feel a theme is something disposable that we use for just two weeks or a month. At Grace Church, we choose a theme as a yearlong approach to our children’s ministry. In the “Vote for Kids” theme, for example, we decorated specific places in the church with red, white, and blue bunting, Olympic symbols, and “Vote for Kids” posters. The teaching staff wore red, white, and blue buttons that announced, “Vote for Kids.” The children wore buttons, affirming the importance of ministry among them. But the theme was not used just to get new volunteers. Rather, it was used throughout the year to highlight the importance of ministry to children. Whether it was special events, teachers meetings, or the annual appreciation banquet, our job that year was to “Vote for Kids” through our own faithful service.

The previous year we used the theme “Big Steps, Little Feet” to promote the importance of adults leading children. Playing off a song by Mary Rice-Hopkins, we highlighted the significance of walking and working with children. Next, we plan to use the theme “Kid’s Express” with a locomotive as our logo and a stationmaster as our point person. The annual themes help our congregation recognize the precious commodity that we have in our children. They invite them to participate in the life-transforming adventure of teaching. An annual theme raises awareness and captivates interest.

Ministry Begins With Attitude

++++++

How are we going to present our children’s ministry to the congregation? Are we going to present it in a negative, problem-focused way? Or are we going to promote it as a thing of beauty and value? How people think leads to what they decide.

Let me use an analogy~ Imagine that you want to go on a cruise. As you approach the dock, you see two ships anchored. The first is an old, trashy-looking freighter. It hasn’t been painted; there is rust all over it. But on the other side of the pier is a luxury liner, let’s say the QE II. Which ship would you rather climb aboard?

When it comes to ministry, some programs present themselves in woeful disrepair. Inadequate classrooms beckon for new teachers; desperate ministers use guilt to enlist a crew. Other programs, just as much in need of workers, present the positive features and values of the ship. Service on the second ship is much more inviting.

I have chosen to present our children’s ministry as the QE II. At Grace, we have *chosen to present a positive image*. Instead of pleading to the congregation, “We need two hundred more workers,” our focus is “Thank you for the four hundred who have already volunteered to serve. There are still ministry opportunities for two hundred more people.”

The need hasn’t changed, but it is presented in a positive way that honors God. People are more likely to want to jump on the ship that’s presented in the most attractive way. When we recruit in a positive manner, people want to come aboard.

I am persuaded that it is not difficult to recruit people if you’re willing to use any warm body. The challenge is to *recruit people with integrity*. That means involving people who want to be there, who want to serve God and serve children. That’s why

recruitment approaches need to reflect a positive image as opposed to a negative or guilt-ridden image.

Guilt works, of course. It influences people. In churches across America, one of the reasons guilt is used as a motivator is that it works in the short term. But in the long term, I think it is devastating. We must look at recruitment for the long term. Today I may get volunteers through guilt, but I'll also experience a high rate of turnover because these people are not happy being there. If they've had their arms twisted, they are not going to want to serve again. Over the long haul, it is more beneficial to present a positive image of what we are doing so that people will want to be a part of it.

Attitude is important. Unfortunately, some people shortsightedly believe that working with children isn't very important. Some refer to events in the nursery or the two-year-old class or even working with five-year-olds as "baby-sitting." I've even heard professionally paid staff refer to their nursery ministry as baby-sitting or to early childhood ministries as child care. They speak of it almost as if it is simply child care on Sunday mornings. By implication they are saying that nothing spiritual is going on there, that these volunteers are just taking care of the kids so that the "real" ministry with adults can take place elsewhere.

When that kind of attitude is verbalized to people, a feeling is established that children's ministry is not important. I have no hesitation about correcting that attitude. Even if a senior pastor lets that attitude slip out, let's say at a staff meeting, I have no problem stopping and interjecting, "Remember, we don't do child care, we don't do baby-sitting; we do ministry with children." *I want everyone to value children's ministry.* Our terminology about our work with children is important! We need to use service terminology in children's ministry in order to help people understand that working with children is not only important, but a vital way to grow our church.

Positive speech about children's ministry must begin among the teaching staff if it's to be caught by the larger congregation. We are all recruiters for children's ministry! The only question is whether what we say encourages or discourages people from volunteering. In our training, I help people understand that what we say about children's ministry dictates people's receptivity to being a part of that ministry. If people communicate that their job is a terrible assignment but because of a commitment to God they are there, those folks are going to be there by themselves for a long time.

Instead, we communicate in a positive way: "I had a great time on Sunday. We had a lot of kids for the number of teachers, but I know that what I am doing is making a difference in a child's life. It is significant. It is meaningful. I live for those kids coming up to me and giving me hugs every Sunday."

When we do that, then all of a sudden people start to say, "Wait a minute. John over there is doing something significant with his life. He is touching lives and enjoying it. He is part of a team. I'd like to do that! Tell me more. How can I get involved?"

At that point we are able to tell them what the responsibilities of a table teacher are, for example. Then we can add, "If I can do it, you can do it."

Whether in the office, in a small group, in the hallway at church, or on the golf course, people should catch a positive view of children's ministry from us. Presenting a positive image is expressed not just in print. It is not limited to what is said from the pulpit. It is also those *positive comments that we make to one another that carry the most weight.* I think that is very important. The willingness of people to be open to service largely depends on how positive our teachers and parents are about their experience. Growing Christians all want to be part of a significant ministry.

The Priority of Children

++++++

When we begin to plan a recruitment campaign, it always comes back to why we do what we do. When people ask me about recruitment, for example, I usually reply with the question, “What is it that you’re trying to accomplish? What are your goals for this ministry? What is your mission statement? What is your philosophy of ministry?” The answers to these questions will dictate how a church goes about its ongoing ministry and inviting volunteers to serve.

The church whose purpose is to minister primarily to adults will run a children’s ministry in a distinctly different way than a church where the focus is on all individuals, including children.

As we work with families in our church, one of the basic questions we ask is, “Why do we have a children’s ministry?” The answer to this question dictates how recruitment is handled. So I may ask myself, “Is this a ministry for children? Or is this a ministry for the parents dropping off the children? Which is it? Or is it both?” At Grace Church, our first priority in children’s ministry is our boys and girls. We want to see children grow in their faith. We have an extensive mission statement, but the basic idea is that boys and girls are our primary priority.

With that underlying philosophy, we can then make programmatic decisions. Our recruitment procedures are guided by what is best for boys and girls. Again, this is different than asking what is best for the parent or the volunteer. In other words, what are our priorities? Who is going to be most important in our decision-making process? We have identified the children as our highest priority.

With children being first, we believe that the second most important person is the children’s worker, many of whom are parents. They also happen to be the people I deal with the most.

Third in importance, certainly, are the parents. In our ministry to boys and girls, we are not only serving the children, but we are also supporting and helping our parents. While programs are going on for adults, we are simultaneously ministering to children. They are tied together. These three levels of importance help us to establish priorities in decision making, not to indicate worth.

Now someone might say, “OK, that’s simple. What children’s ministry isn’t going to agree with that?” Although I haven’t found anybody who disagrees with it, I have found a lot of people who demonstrate that they disagree with it by how they organize their children’s ministry. We see it in churches that tend to come up with “creative” alternatives for volunteer staffing. They may go to an every-other-week kind of a format. They may have three teams that alternate in and out of the classroom throughout the year. There are all kinds of other strategies, for example, a teacher serving once a month, one month on, two months off.

A lot of times these churches are recruiting on a rotation basis because they have run out of options. That may be all they can do. But I want to ask, “What is best for the child? Is it going to be best for the child to have a different worker every week?” The answer to that is no. But if I ask, “Do workers want to do it that way?” too often the answer is yes. Every church has truly committed people who want to be in the ministry and who want to be able to teach children week after week. These are the volunteers who give it their all. No church has enough of those people. Unfortunately, many people in our churches do not want to commit to weekly classroom responsibility.

Avoiding the Inoculation Trap

++++++

Our philosophy, therefore, influences the procedural decisions that we make. For example, decisions about alternative forms of recruiting, such as once-a-month rotations, are not

consistent with our goals, and therefore are not our first approach. Rotational staffing is not consistent with placing children as our top priority.

There are other ramifications to these decisions. The place where these other forms of staffing seem to happen most is in the nursery. A lot of times in early childhood ministry, churches use rotating teams. More often than not, it is a once-a-month type of a worker.

The first thing that happens in this type of situation is that it multiplies fourfold or greater the number of workers needed for that ongoing ministry. Then the obvious question is, “Do we have enough manpower to be able to accomplish that?” In the vast majority of churches, the answer is no. But for me there is a more basic philosophical concern. Volunteer approaches that use periodic service can inoculate people against ministry. They will accept only a limited commitment to ministry. That becomes a trap.

The reason I say that is once-a-month workers forget 25 percent of the time or more that this is their time of the month to serve. Too many are inconsistent. This greatly contributes to the turnover of nursery directors because they are constantly trying to recruit. They see many uncommitted people who neglect their responsibility, and the directors get burned out.

In the classroom where teachers serve on a once-a-month basis, the children are not nearly as familiar with the workers. And when children are not familiar with the workers, it creates insecurity in their life and the children act out by misbehaving, which requires more care and discipline. In the nursery, the babies are going to cry more, which is not a pleasant experience for the children or the adults.

When a child gets a little bit older—perhaps four or five—and that rotation happens, he is old enough to start expressing his discomfort more clearly and doing what he can to resist going into

his classroom. Volunteers who are not there every week become frustrated with the discipline problems in their classrooms. The kids say they don’t like Sunday school, and the volunteers don’t return next year. This type of children’s ministry is organized for conflict because the philosophy says one thing, but the organization says something else.

High-Value Service

+ + + + +

If all we are doing is baby-sitting, why don’t we just hire people to do that? But if we want to get somebody involved in ministry, then we need to *communicate to volunteers that what they are doing is significant*. We tell them that right where they are serving, they are doing ministry. They are ministers. They are not doing this so that ministry can take place someplace else on the campus. They are doing real ministry right there—in the nursery, in the classroom, in the midweek club.

There are other practical issues that are part of placing a high value on children’s ministry, such as how many teachers should be in a classroom. Teacher-to-student ratios are important. In our ministry, we have identified our target teacher-student ratio for each age level. We have identified the classroom size and how many square feet we want to have per child. We have compared what the ideal department size should be with the actual department size. And we have put together this objective criteria to let us know whether or not we are accomplishing our goals. *Adequate staff and space all contribute to volunteer retention.*

I don’t know that we are ever going to be at 100 percent with all of these criteria. We certainly are not meeting them now. We have far more kids than we have space for them. In a congregation that has six services and four learning hours, the space issue is always a challenge. Still, it is my job to make the best assignments possible, so I am always going over our goals and resources.

Each fall we promote our children to their new classes. Basically, we are moving children from one room to another, based on the number of children and teachers now needed. None of us would feel good with a one-to-six ratio in the nursery, nor could we afford a one-to-one ratio. So our leadership team makes the necessary assignments and subsequent adjustments to guarantee a secure and sound learning experience for all of our children. This is our challenge.

Though Grace Church needs hundreds of workers each year, any warm body won't do. Once these workers are recruited and have signed on the dotted line, much happens throughout the year by way of encouragement and training to make the theme a reality. Grace Church, in fact, does "Vote for Kids" and affirms their children throughout the year.

++++++

For most of us, life in the twenty-first century is busy. Most people have more on their to-do list than they can possibly accomplish. Yet sincere Christians want to serve their Lord. They want to use their time and spiritual gifts wisely. Therefore, a program perceived as valuable is worth being in. A catchy, visible theme captures attention. One church, for example, using the theme "Feed My Sheep," had each child wear a badge with a picture of a lamb on it. Teachers wore badges that said, "I feed sheep." The posters and announcements during their recruitment campaign invited others to join them by stating, "You can feed sheep too!"

A challenging theme must first be based on, and consistent with, a well-thought-out biblical philosophy of ministry. Grace Church has found that they can use this integrated approach as a rallying point at the beginning of the year for recruitment, and as a theme for esprit de corps during the year for teachers and the

celebration at the end of the year for a successful term of service. Likewise, other churches have also found that an annual theme can raise the awareness and status of the educational ministry within their congregations.



Ministry Resources

The following materials are used at Grace Church of Edina in their Christian education ministries. Permission to use and adapt these resources in your congregation is granted. Duplication or distribution of these copyrighted materials for resale is prohibited.

These materials include:

- [Volunteer Staff Application](#)
- [Children's Ministries Response Form](#)
- [Pastoral Promotion of Children's Ministries](#)
- [Children's Ministry Pamphlet](#)
- [Children's Ministry Goals](#)
- [Volunteer Worker Expectations](#)
- [Volunteer Worker's Outreach Evaluation Form](#)
- [Follow-Up Guidelines for Teachers of Children](#)
- [Children's Ministry Logos](#)