

# Episode Six

## Avoiding pitfalls: using language effectively & evaluating programs

Jonathan Sargeant

Welcome to episode 6 of Faith Formation Essentials, the short course that puts you in the driving seat for faith formation! I just made that up but I'm really coming around to it! This is our last episode together, so we've saved up some dynamite for the home stretch. Basically, there are two parts to this one. Firstly, we're going to learn some skills that enable us to do faith formation with ourselves and our people in a way that takes into account absolute best practice with communication skills. We're going to learn two simple communication techniques that WILL improve the effectiveness of your faith teaching and learning but also serve to reduce arguments, increase engagement and boost your own confidence in the area! Sound good? These skills are great! At the same time these techniques are super ethical, and super respectful. So that'll be good.

To round things off then, we'll think a little about criteria to use to help you choose effective Faith formation materials, whether that's a video a book with studies, lesson material, a curriculum or whatever. We've saved this 'till the end because it kind of sums up everything we've done so far and will draw on much of what we've covered too. And maybe as soon as you've recovered from doing this course, you might be out there trying to choose stuff to use anyway, so it's very practical in that sense.

Fiona Hammond and Jonathan Sargeant

J - Okay, first let's talk about communication. What happens when conversation goes like this?...

J - "Vegemite on toast for breakfast is the best."

F - "No, it's not! Peanut butter on toast is the best for breakfast, clearly."

J - "Nuh uh, it's vegemite, it's obvious. Vegemite, salty, yum vegemite."

F - "You can't be serious...peanut butter has that wonderful little mixture of the saltiness, the peanutty, a little touch of sweetness in there. It is so superior."

SP - "Wait a minute, both of you are wrong, it's muesli. Muesli is clearly the best!"

Jonathan Sargeant

Ok so what am I getting at? I'm getting at the idea that conversations with differences of opinion can be difficult. And conversations about differences with



faith ideas can be even more difficult, even more complicated. So much so that sometimes we avoid even having those discussions when we have differences of opinion, differences of point of view.

I think it's related to even broader issues about why people don't talk about faith in general in our various Australian cultures. We're anxious about conflict, we're scared that because these ideas go to the core of our being, people do have different points of view and that could cause arguments. We want to avoid arguments. Most of us anyway...

The problem is that it's actually healthy for us to talk about our differences, to talk about our different theological ideas. That's how we learn from others, that's how we learn to appreciate others, it's often how we learn to understand our own point of view more clearly if we have to think about how we would explain it to someone else.

In fact, even St Peter was pretty clear on this. He talks about the idea that we should be able to make a good account of our faith in first Peter 3:15. We should be able to talk about our faith. And in the world of Faith Formation, where we're trying to help people grow their faith, we need to be able to discuss faith and our differences.

I do remember as a young person doing evangelism training and working out my 3-minute testimony I could slip into conversations wherever it would fit. I guess I've kind of moved on from that these days because I realise that sharing faith is not about having some practiced little chunk of monologue to download on people when they least expect it.

Instead, we think a little bit about St Paul, preaching at the Areopagus. In his sermon he uses the example of the unknown god, of the statue that was right there in the square where he was speaking. Now there are a lot of things we can learn from the way Paul does that but one of the things that sticks out to me is this: It's the idea that how we talk about our faith is not just a matter about how we want to say things. It's also always helpful to think about who we are talking to and think about how they will hear what we are saying, not just what we are saying itself.

Ok so if we take that as read, that talking about faith involves not only talking about the thing that we want to talk about but also think about how it will be heard by other people then there are some things to take account of. One of the things that I've noticed in my time around the Church, and especially working on the edges of the church - working with high school students for 25 years or so



teaching RE - was that often it's not the content of faith that's the problem when you have these conversations. The people that I would share about faith with, they were actually really interested in what faith was all about and the content of faith.

What could sometimes be a problem was not the content of the faith, but how some people talk about their faith, the words, the expressions, even the assumptions behind these things. How they share about faith can get in the way of good faith conversations. And I think that has relevance for whenever we talk about faith, not just with people who are learning about it for the first time but also when we have differences of points of view on theological issues.

### Elissa Cotroneo

Ok so what can we do about this? Well one simple thing to begin with is to be aware of the jargon that we use when we talk about our faith. Christians have a lot of jargon - a lot of technical language, you could call it that; that's a nicer way of saying jargon. Jargon sounds like a negative thing. We have a lot of technical language, whether it's 'grace' or 'sacraments' or 'trinity', or 'rector' or 'canon'; we have a lot of jargon.

Now the problem of that is this: when we use a particular word, say 'grace', the person that we're talking to might know that word, but they might have a different understanding of it; a different perspective on that word. Grace... is it a girl's name? Is it a thing you say before a meal? Is it a faith idea about God loving us even though we don't always deserve that? Now we can't just get rid of this faith jargon. Some of us used to think that: "We should get rid of all the jargon, so that someone could walk in off the street and understand everything". But that technical language is important; it describes important things. Learning that language is a part of learning and understanding faith.

So thing number 1 - when we are using technical language, take the time to get on the same page with our groups. When we talk about a particular thing we ask what they understand by that word.

### Jonathan Sargeant

This comes home to me in the good old RE days with year 11 students. That was the group that I taught most often in those 25 years. We would do that old activity where we get students to draw God or to draw the God that they didn't believe in. That way everyone would have to do something. Anyway, have a look now at a few of these pictures that students drew. I've grabbed a random selection; these aren't unusual



pictures, it's just a random selection, and have a look at the kinds of ways that God is pictured by these students. (See the video with images of God from The Gap State High School.) There are some more traditional ideas, influenced by their family background, possibly some exposure to church things.

By far most are pictures that draw on all kinds of other imagery, whether from movies or tv, whether from imagination, whether from discussions these young people have had wherever they might be. Ultimately the point is we can't take it for granted that even when we use the word "God", something so central to our faith, that the people we are talking with have the same idea as we do.

#### Elissa Cotroneo

Now if we are talking within the Christian community you might think "I can make some assumptions there," and surely you can. There are some central things that just about all Christian people would hold in common about God, but it's helpful to acknowledge even from the start that there may be differences here. It's just good to acknowledge that we are not talking about faith just to impose our view on someone else, but that we are actually talking so we can hear from other people. In other words, conversation, even teaching and learning about faith should be a dialogue, not a monologue. This dialogue idea is a crucial part of good conversation, good learning about faith. It doesn't mean we think that our point of view will automatically be changed just because we hear someone else's point of view but maybe we should firstly be willing to learn from another person, appreciate their point of view and maybe acknowledge that God might want to change us through the conversations we have with another person.

#### Jonathan Sargeant

Ok - thing number one - be aware of jargon. Be aware of getting on the same page as the other people we are sharing with when we do that - that could be a useful learning thing all in itself.

Thing number two, actually thing number two and three are two simple language techniques that once you grasp really, in my experience, improve discussions about faith whether that's with people who are new to faith things or with people who are experienced in the world of faith too. They are so useful to teaching and learning about faith formation. Let me give you some foundational stuff first to back up their use.



Let's do some imagining. Aaaaah, that's nice. Alright down to business... Imagine if you will, all the things you can say about faith. There's a lot. There are various ways to simplify that task, like categorising these faith-talk things.

Two categories. The first is all of the things you can say about faith that are provable, or disprovable. You could call these fact-type statements. These are all the things that are provable, measurable and so on. So for instance, how many disciples are mentioned in the gospels as following Jesus in the beginning? The answer is a fact type statement, cos you can do the research and the answer is pretty clear-cut. What year did a particular church council happen in the early church? You can do the research and the answer is (probably) clear cut, as records were kept. Fact Type Statements. But it's not just historical stuff. "When I pray, I often feel closer to God" is a fact type statement. I do a thing; I get a feeling and I'm telling you it's the case. So its fact-type statement.

### Fiona Hammond

But not all of the things we can say about faith are in this category. There is another. There are fact-type statements but there are also belief-type statements.

For example: "The Holy Spirit is with us in the room as I speak". Can't prove it. Can't DISprove it either.

"Christ is present in a mystical way during the Eucharist." We can't prove this, but we believe it.

Belief-type statements. This is the essence of faith RIGHT HERE, though remember, fact-type statements are a part of our faith too.

Ok, let's try this out a little. Find the workbook section for episode 6 and you'll see some examples of these statements. Your job is to try and work out whether each one is a fact-type statement, a belief-type statement, or maybe even a mix of the two. Decide for each one on the page.

And here's a red-hot tip: when you hear the statement, try to put yourself into the shoes of someone who doesn't believe this. Then it becomes easy to imagine that person declaring, "That's just your belief." As soon as you can imagine someone saying that, you know you probably have a belief-type statement in front of you.

Okay we'll pause the video and you can have a go at each of the statements. If any are confusing, don't worry and just move onto the next one. And if they're ALL confusing, don't worry, soon we'll explain them.



## Jonathan Sargeant

Okay how did you go? Let's have a look at these statements and see what we can learn. Don't be too worried if I suggest some different answers to what you had; consider it a learning experience!

Okay statement 1, 'God planned that people should care.' What did you think? Fact Type statement or belief type statement? While to a believer this one may appear to be a statement of fact, it presumes belief in God and even a particular understanding of the nature of God. Therefore it's a belief type statement.

The second one? "Some of the basic problems of the early Christian community were learning to love and serve one another etc etc." This is a fact-type statement. Why? Because it's open to historical research and is the type of statement that an impartial historian could make without having a particular belief commitment. Such a statement may have problems for some if the only historical source available is the Bible. Note, however, the distinction between statements in the Bible which deal with observable events and those which are interpretations or faith affirmations.

Okay number 3: Prayer gives me a feeling that someone really understands me. This one might seem a bit tricky. While this statement deals with prayer and thus involves beliefs, it is a fact-type statement because it is made as a personal affirmation. It refers to the experiences of the speaker and is owned by the use of 'me'. Getting the hang of these?

The fourth statement: "Solomon was the son of David and Bathsheba. From the time he was young, he was specially flavoured by the Lord." Okay I did say flavoured, just to see if you were still listening! "Favoured by the Lord" This one does have a trick because it features both kinds of statements in one! The first sentence is a fact-type statement, open to historical research. You could try to find that out. However, to say that he was 'specially favoured by the Lord' introduces a belief or interpretation. Not everyone would describe Solomon that way.

And lastly "The Father of all Spirits woke the Sun Mother and sent her to cover the earth with plants and to bring to life birds and animals." Was this one easier to do for some of you? Most people readily see this as a belief-type statement, perhaps because it is easier to identify the beliefs of what might be others. It could be grounded by referring to it as a story from the Dreamtime or a first nations legend. Alright, we worked through a few of those to give you some practice in identifying



fact type statements and belief type statements. Why do this? Because part of the communication breakdown that can occur when having chats about theological differences or even just sharing faith ideas with other people is about how we talk about stuff in each of these categories.

The problem occurs when we make belief-type statements AS IF THEY HAVE BEEN PROVED AND MUST BE ACCEPTED AS TRUE FOR EVERYONE. I'm not saying that our beliefs aren't true...but I am saying that if we say "The Holy Spirit is here with us right now" we have to accept that some people hearing this will reply, "Really? Well how would you prove that!?! That's just YOUR belief, not mine."

When we say belief-type statements as if they are automatically accepted by everyone, we are making a presumption about the people we're talking with. In fact we can call this "presumptive language". It presumes all are on the same page and makes no room for anyone to have a different perspective. So, people can get their backs up, sometimes without even knowing why. I've talked about this to a LOT of people from outside the church faith community and they say to me that this is typical of how certain people of faith talk about their faith. Lots of presumptive talk, making dogmatic faith claims. It just switches off conversation. Maybe there's even a feeling in Australian society that this is what Christians will do if you engage with them about faith. You'll get brow-beaten about faith ideas. It kills dialogue. And I wonder if those of us who aren't prone to dogmatic faith assertions have learnt not to talk about our faith in public because we don't want to be perceived as the kind of people who do that brwo-beating. Maybe...

Anyway this is a problem! Talking about different approaches to faith or living without it should be a natural part of being human. It is in some other cultures I've experienced on other parts of the planet. And if we're in the practice of trying to grow faith with people, young or older or both, then this is a problem we need to solve. We don't want to be turning OFF dialogue. We want to be enabling it!

Fortunately there ARE solutions to this problem. These are solutions that are appropriate to ANY talk about belief, whether inside the church or beyond the church walls. Two simple language techniques that address this.

Aaron Vidyasagar

So what are these already?!?! The first of these two things is called "owning". When I own a belief-type statement I simply use a sentence starter like "I believe" or "it seems to me"...or "in my experience". Even maybe "I think". I do think the "I believe" statement is more significant. Anyway, when we own our theological



statements – our beliefs – by using those kind of sentence starters it does something significant.

Let's revisit the breakfast example. Instead of two people talking about their differing views in a dogmatic way, we get statements like this:

"I think that vegemite is the best food to have on toast."

And someone else says "I think peanut butter is the best."

You might think there is still an argument here, but sentences that start with "I believe", and "I think" acknowledge that your point of view is not the only possible point of view. They step back from the dogmatic position that says there's only one way to think and that's important, that's really crucial, because you know what? It's true!

### Bruce Boase

Now that might be hard for us to get our heads around. We might think "My belief about baptism is the only point of view, the correct point of view". Infant baptism, believer baptism whatever it might be. But let's step back a bit...ultimately we've come to a particular belief about those things based on our reading of scripture, the community that nurtured us, our understanding of tradition and our grasp of reason too. It's a fact that another person could grow into a different understanding by reading scripture, and by thinking through the tradition of the church and by using their reason as well.

It can be difficult to understand but for many theological issues, there are other positions. For each of these positions, there are people able to justify them based on readings of scripture and tradition and the use of reason and so on.

So owning: "I believe", "I think", "It seems to me", "In my experience"... we own a particular point of view.

As soon as we do that the way is open for the other person or people to own other points of view too. It invites others to say "Oh that's what you believe? Well here's what I believe." It leaves the way open for the next part of a conversation, like: "Tell me about that!" or "I find that really interesting, how did you discover that?" And suddenly there is a dialogue that allows each to learn from the other. We've had the chance to share our ideas. This is 'owning'.

### Elissa Cotroneo

Now we said there are two language techniques: owning is the first one. The





second one is similar but different. It's called grounding. Now if owning is the kind of personal version of this, "I believe", grounding is the more macro point of view - when we attach a belief statement to the group of people who believe it or to the source for that belief. So, we might say "Many Christians believe..." "Most Christians believe..." or "Some Christians believe" depending on the statement we are grounding.

As I said, we can also use grounding to attach a particular belief to its source which might even just mean "In First Corinthians 13, it says blah blah blah". So grounding is helpful too in a different way because it enables significant learning. When a belief-type statement is grounded you know where a belief has come from, where an idea, or a particular part of scripture comes from and that's helpful too.

Some people have said, "How do you know which to do - whether to own or ground?" Once you have a go at it, what's appropriate in any given moment starts to become quite obvious.

### Jonathan Sargeant

So, what does using owning and grounding do?

Well I've already said it encourages dialogue. I've already said it allows for other points of view. It means we're learning from each other. It means we can actually put these words out on the table we can actually talk about them and get into the nuance of them rather than having this 'us vs them' dichotomy where we may become scared of having conversations because we couldn't do it peacefully. Owning and grounding means we can talk about our different points of view and do it peacefully too.

Now I do want to mention just a couple of problems that can come up with these two things. I have heard before someone say (you might have heard this too) "The Bible teaches..." blah blah blah. Now there are various things that most Christians believe are central and you might think it valid to say, "the Bible teaches." Generally, though when I hear people say that, it seems to me (oh look, I'm owning this) it seems to me that people say "the Bible teaches" when they are actually talking about a particular point on which there are other possible points of view. So, it might be more appropriate to say, "the Bible teaches me that..." and then share what you were going to share. "The Bible teaches me...", rather than "the Bible teaches", as if there's only one possible reading of this.



The other potential problem is a thing I've heard where someone says, "most Christians believe..." and then they finish that sentence with a particular belief that may be MOST Christians don't believe. It's a shame to have to get into the maths of this.

We don't want to get into quibbling too much about exact numbers of how many people believe this or that. We should just be aware that it's possible that some people even unconsciously might want to back up their own agenda by suggesting that most Christians believe a particular thing when that's not necessarily the case. I'm sure we don't want to be doing anything underhanded like that. I'd suggest refraining from that where there's some doubt about it. Again...it takes some wisdom and humility to get to a place where you can do this.

Ultimately though, I have found the use of this owning and grounding is super useful. I've found it helpful when sharing about faith with people who don't have much idea about faith... owning and grounding encourages dialogue where it's possible to say "Yes I agree with you or "I've got this issue, I've got this question" and so on.

So, in a sense, owning and grounding and thinking about the jargon idea too - it's a kind of evangelism training if people are shy about sharing their faith. And here's a bonus: when using owning and grounding statements, it's almost impossible to be perceived as a Bible basher, or a brainwasher - because you're just looking for dialogue with another person. You're not using dogmatic assertions that suggest there's only one way to think about a particular thing. Some Christians fear that reaction, and it turns them off sharing their faith at all. And it contributes to a silence about religion in various Australian cultures because we don't want to be misunderstood.

### Elissa Cotroneo

So we think this owning and grounding stuff is great. It enables us to have these conversations and do so as a natural part of unfolding relationships with people who are new to faith. And within the Church, using this owning and grounding means that we can actually learn from each other. 'Owning and grounding' could help heal some of the factionalism that develops within the church. I'd much rather a church where we learn from each other, where we acknowledge that we have different points of view, but we see the ways in which God has led us to these different points of view. We see the ways in which these different points of view have their strengths that we can learn from, and we see that our own points of view might be softened by such a dialogue.



So we affirm owning and grounding. You can see that we're sold on this stuff. Can I suggest that you give it a go? Just experiment with using owning and grounding – "I believe", or "some Christians believe", "many Christians believe".

At first it can feel unusual but if you just get into the habit of doing it, it becomes easy, second nature. Ultimately, I think this is a part of how the kingdom works... different people being faithful to God, different points of view on some things, but valuing each other, learning from each other, all towards doing God's mission in the world.

If you'd like to know more, there is an article about the use of owning and grounding that you can download at this url here:

<http://www.formedfaith.org/talking-peacefully-about-religious-ideas>

It is an article about using 'owning and grounding' in the Religious Education world, in state schools, but I think you could find information useful across many contexts.

### Fiona Hammond

Ok, we've travelled quite a journey from episode 1 to now. So we're going to finish off the course by talking about choosing effective material to use in your faith formation activities. As you might imagine this is a pretty broad area. But let's see if we can give you some assistance, because, really, this is where the rubber hits the road, right?

If you've ever been involved in choosing material for faith formation, whether it's for small groups, like a Lenten study, or for yourself, flying solo or even for school situations, looking for faith education material, you know there are a range of ideas people think through when they choose. Some of us work at a gut level and just look at the bookshelves and point to one.

But what I want to get at is this: there are effective criteria and there are criteria that are not so effective! For instance, if you are looking at a range of things and one sticks out, it might just be because it looks nice. It's colourful, there are pictures, etc.

Or maybe you've been given a budget and you just grab the thing that fits within that budget. Now design and price are factors to be considered!! Those things do matter but are they the most important things?

If we care about effective faith formation then there are other things to think about, things that are more important.



We've purposely left this content about effective criteria for choosing faith formation materials to the end because it really does use all of the learning we've been doing so far.

Let's take all that work on effective faith formation, thinking models, cognitive development, and faith development... and recognise it can all be useful in choosing material for your faith formation context: be it a small group, a school classroom, your own or a parish study. Use that knowledge; and look for material that reflects sound practice in all of the things we've been learning about.

### Aaron Vidyasagar

First things first: before you rock onto a website about faith formation materials, or a good-old-fashioned book shop, you need to understand yourself! You need to be aware of where you stand theologically, educationally, missionally and ecclesiastically. Be aware of your ideas about what the church is and how it works. Etcetera! I'm just saying etc. because there are other things as well. We need to understand ourselves or at least have a developing understanding. And we need to have an understanding of the community in which this material will be used, our church or our school or wherever.

The trick is that all Faith Formation materials will have a stance on all of these things, mostly but not always between the lines. In educational circles we call things like this the "Hidden Curriculum". Trained people like yourselves can discern these leanings, though sometimes that can be tricky as well. I'm not suggesting anyone is trying to put anything over on you. Just that every material operates out of a set of basic assumptions and picking the right thing can make sure we get a good match.

And having said that, sometimes it's appropriate to use material that challenges us to step outside of our own sets of preferences. But that's for you to decide. Anyway, back to the process of choosing.

### Bruce Boase

You can make choices about resources BEFORE you go looking. Identify the important things to look for in your material. In other words WHAT criteria you'll use to make your decision.

Of course, the very first thing to get straight is to nail down exactly what you're after. So we ask ourselves some questions.



What is the need this material will aim to meet?

Who are the learners who will use this material?

What is the physical space available for the learning environment?

Then once you start browsing for stuff, online, or in a library or shop, you can turn these questions around to think about suitability of actual material...

So you think about the material and ask:

1. How much does it suit you as user? – In other words, is it easy to facilitate? Is there a clear “How To” guide? Also, is this material easy to promote, since you’ve got to convince people to use it. So, are there any promo materials that come with it?

2. How much does it suits the audience? – in other words, is it age and developmentally appropriate? Is it fun? Is it addressing the needs of the users?

3. How much does it suits the church’s needs? – Is it synchronous with the aims of the church’s mission? Is it cheap?

4. How much does it match the accepted ideas about what Faith Formation is and how it should be done – So if we’ve come to an understanding of what Faith Formation actually is when it’s done well, philosophically and practically, does this material reflect that?

These questions aren’t in order of importance.

ALL are important in making your decision.

Fiona Hammond

To go into a little more detail, we’ve reprinted a list of questions from Karen Tye’s wonderful book, Basics of Christian Education. Find them in the episode 6 section of your workbook. There are lots of sets of questions like this all over the internet, but Karen has done a great job of asking the essential questions without a lot of extra padding. She gets to the point; I like that!

In a moment pause the video and have a look at her questions. Go through them, imagining you’re using them to look at some of your material. In fact, you might even grab a study book or Unit of work for a school and apply these questions to see how it is to use them. If you’ve got nothing at hand I’ll put a link on the screen



for a set of materials we've been using in the diocese in the last few years, the Pilgrim course from the UK, and you can use that as your guinea pig. That link takes you to the website that lets you see the small group materials, their aims, the associated video material and so on. It's pretty good stuff, but Tye's questions can highlight a few things to note or that can use modifying for Australian audiences. Okay, just if you need that.

If you're working in a group, you can chat about what it's like to use this set of questions. Are they 'wieldy', which is the opposite of 'unwieldy'? and so on. Working on your own make your own notes or modifications to Tye's list if that suits. Okay, I won't hold you up, pause the video now and have a look at Tye's questions and their suitability.

Alright what did you think? A pretty good list? Some questions will be more important to some communities than others. That's okay, if we can justify that with good thinking.

If you ever need to make a report on a few materials to get someone else to okay it, Tye's list provides a clear structure to do that. And maybe you thought of some other useful questions that should be added here and there? If you did, feel free to drop us a line to suggest them. I'd love to know!

### Jonathan Sargeant

Alright, lets round it off there. We've covered some significant ground along the way on our journey up the Faith Formation mountain. Quite a climb! Thank you for your hard work and concentration as we've thought and pondered and learnt and tussled with big ideas. This is all so important to our faith and the future of our faith. How will we learn and grow in our faith? How will we thrive and flourish? How will our faith communities thrive and flourish? These are BIG questions. But I trust that some of the stuff we've done together has given you some hope that there ARE answers to these questions.

With thoughtful God-led approaches to faith formation, our faith WILL grow.

With creative, Spirit-led approaches to faith formation, our faith communities WILL thrive.

With Jesus-centred prayer and thought and creativity and love for each other, faith will flourish.



