

Tired church jargon

Some buzzwords that are due for a sabbatical

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [August 29, 2018](#) issue



When we want to impress others with how knowledgeable we are on a particular subject, buzzwords and phrases sometimes come in handy. Every field has them—fashionable terms that can morph into annoying jargon. Jargon includes those words and phrases that grow tired from overuse while remaining notoriously difficult for outsiders to understand. Educators may speak of instructional scaffolding, flipped classrooms, and self-blended learning. Business people talk about deliverables, synergistic game changers, and moving the needle.

Christian professionals have their own share of irritating words and phrases that creep into church lingo. Jargon doesn't exactly build bridges of welcome to spiritual newcomers. And even when used with sincerity, such words rarely nourish the soul. Here's my latest list of words and phrases that need to take a serious vacation from the Christian lexicon.

The word *missional* took off in popularity two decades ago and fast became a favorite among many church leaders. It soon came to mean anything people wanted it to mean. I've seen churches so thoroughly missional that their donuts taste missional, their signage reads missional, and their floor wax smells missional. God's mission in remaking the world is a lovely idea. But adding a couple of extra letters to make a straightforward reality sound sophisticated doesn't work. *Missional* is fuzzy jargon, pure and simple.

I know some pastors inclined to making frequent pulpit references to the “radical in-breaking of God.” Who knows what that is supposed to mean, except that it sounds an awful lot like what thieves do to a jewelry store in the middle of the night. Then there is “intentional discernment.” I appreciate the earnestness of that expression but am left to conclude that the one thing worse than intentional discernment must be unintentional discernment.

One pastor in my community announced in his newsletter column that the people of his congregation had been “unleashed to volunteer.” I’m guessing that he was not mistaking his church for a dog kennel, but exactly how the people were previously tethered remains unclear to me. And have you seen that church-branding catchphrase that touts “real faith for real people”? I’m trying to convince our church board to adopt a new tagline to give believers in our community a better option: phony faith for mannequins. They haven’t bought my idea yet.

If I hear another reference to a new relationship or a spilled cup of coffee or lost car keys turning up in one’s pocket as being “a God thing,” I’m going to go on eBay and buy a Volkswagen Thing—that ugly, disastrously unsafe, pretend Jeep of a car from the early ’70s—and tell everyone that owning this contraption is most certainly a God Thing. To make my point, I intend to fill it up with friends on free evenings and do some *fellowshiping* with them as we drive around town.

Words are the instruments by which we construct a world. Finding the right words for the right situation ought to be a critical commitment for people who bend their life around *the Word*. Maybe what Christian churches need for tired jargon is a vessel similar to a Jewish *genizah*. It’s a repository for worn-out Hebrew-language books that ultimately get buried in a cemetery or synagogue basement.

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