



Building healthy systems of communication for strong, growing congregations! (Part 3)

By Jeannette Flynn

There is an old game some of us played as children at parties that has a variety of names. *Chinese Whispers*, *Telephone*, *Grapevine*, and *Gossip*, are some of the alias by which the little child's game was played. The first player whispers a phrase or sentence to the next player. Each player successively whispers what that player believes he or she heard to the next. The last player announces the statement to the entire group. Errors typically accumulate in the retellings, so the statement announced by the last player differs significantly, and often amusingly, from the one uttered by the first player.

Unfortunately that child's game gets "played" all too often in our congregations and ministries – with the same outcome – bad communication! It is easy to fall into this habit, and at times just seems convenient, to use "**pass-through communication**." Last week we talked a bit about "triangulation." Like that form of poor communication, "pass-through information" also involves three parties. The difference between these two errors in healthy communication is that pass-through information is **generally** meant to be harmless and is often used to send a message without taking the time to actually communicate with the intended recipient. To get a message to someone, you tell someone else. For example - I say to my friend Mary, (who isn't on any committee) "We're going to change the meeting agenda for Missions and we need Bob to get his report done early this month. Mary, you see Bob at work, tell him we're making a change and be ready early." If I have a message for someone – regardless of how important or insignificant - I need to go directly to that person and honor them enough to convey the message. This protects against misinformation, confusion and hurt feelings.

With both triangulation and pass-through communication, few people take responsibility for what is accurate and few people speak directly to each other. Informal channels of pass-through communication lead to misunderstandings down the road. So when the message gets garbled and problems arise, the response is – "I just told him what I understood you to tell me!" Like the children's telephone game, the content usually becomes distorted and often the results are less than helpful.

Miscommunication may occur unintentionally, but at times individuals or groups also can use pass-through communication to divide congregations and stir up conflict. I have been surprised on occasion when a pastor or a lay person will intentionally use "pass-through communication" to try to get more information – stir up conflict – or create division. A few months ago I was traveling and had a fellow pastor say something like this to me, "I was in a meeting last month and we thought maybe you could shed some light on Pastor XYZ. I told the committee I was going to see you soon and I would ask you about him." Now that may sound simple enough, and may have even been very innocent, but what was taking place was I was on the receiving end of pass-through information AND being asked to be on the giving end of pass-through information. A very dangerous situation. Yet, in the church, because of our familiarity with each other and our busy schedules, we can adopt bad forms of communication and not think too much of it.

Giving the message to whomever is close by and expecting him or her to pass it on may seem expedient, but there is no substitute for direct. And like triangulation, pass-through communication must be stopped if there is to be an environment for healthy congregational functioning.

How do we address this issue? First of all we as leaders must set the standard! We ourselves must make the time and effort to communicate directly. An email, a letter, a phone call, face to face with the person we need to be in touch with is best. Secondly, if you are being asked to pass something on you have the power to stop

the pattern. A simple statement such as “I’m not comfortable carrying that message” or “I might mix up what you’ve said, so perhaps you could call him yourself” is very helpful.

Sometimes pass-through communication is a way of dodging someone we have conflict with. Resorting to a bad communication practice as a form of avoidance will not help the situation. If you or people in your congregation are using pass-through communication to resist dealing with conflict, this will only serve as fuel for the fire and eventually erupt into hurt, woundedness and larger issues. If it is busyness, poor administration skills or personal conflicts that are the real reason why unhealthy communication is taking place, resist the temptation. Deal first with any underlying issues that would cause you to choose pass-through communication and restore strong clear forms of direct contact.

As pastors, ministers and leaders we have the authority and responsibility to control the dissemination of information. It is our charge to do everything within our power to strengthen the church, remove barriers and prevent conflict. Identifying negative communication behavior and teaching new ways to manage congregational information can help to transform our congregations, our homes and our communities. Healthy communication is not easy or even simplistic, but it pays HUGE dividends!

Pastors and leaders who name and stop negative communication behavior can help reshape their congregational culture. They cannot do it alone. As lay leaders join the work of communication transformation, the number of individuals modeling more effective communication increases, as does the possibility of changing old patterns. This training and commitment to operate with strong healthy communication skills strengthens relationships, builds trust and provides an avenue for families in the church to relearn better ways to build healthy marriages and strong relationships.

One author summed it up this way, “When people “walk the talk,” they have faith-life integrity. When people “talk the walk,” the intention behind their communication matches the precepts of their faith. Choices about when to speak and when to remain silent are never neutral. To create transparent congregations, each leader needs to “talk” a walk that is consistent with his or her faith. With courage and discernment, faith leaders can talk their faith walk as they address old wounds and build up the community in a spirit of integrity.”¹

Friends, let us do all within our power to walk the talk AND talk the walk so that the schemes of the enemy cannot be fulfilled through our own use of unhealthy communication!

¹ Kibbie Simmons Ruth , Karen A. McClintock, “Speaking the truth in Love”