



Communication for a Healthy Congregation

By Jeannette Flynn

I have recently been leading a Sunday School class in identifying 3 core messages found in the book of Ephesians. While there may be a variety of ways to unfold Paul's teaching to the church in Ephesus, in our Sunday School class we have spent our time exploring **“What does it look like to really BE the church as God intended?”** There are three non-negotiable - authentic koinonia: united commitment to the mission and personal devotion to being an imitator of God in loving others. As we have explored these central themes, healthy communication has continually been recognized as foundational to really being the church that God intended us to be.

Over the last few articles we have talked about how important it is that we as leaders help our congregations develop strong and healthy forms of communication. We have been addressing various ways that people in the church practice unhealthy forms of communication. This article tackles the dreaded “anonymous” communication. This form of communication actually comes at us in a variety of ways. There is the unsigned letter under the door or through the mail; there are emails that come from hotmail or yahoo with a strange code name. Those are easy for me – no name, no return address, no way to identify the sender first – that's what the delete button was made for – before I read a word! If the author didn't believe in what they wrote strongly enough to sign their name, I don't need to read it.

The more insidious form of anonymous communication though is actually delivered in person by someone who spews very unhealthy and hurtful information while using the phrases – **“they said,” “many feel,”** or I can't tell you who said that because I promised the person who told me confidentiality. It sounds so spiritual and almost courageous when they are passing on this information. And yet, anonymous information always causes hurt, misunderstanding and division.

You have to ask yourself, “Why do people who claim to love God use this unhealthy form of communication?” It could be the individual with the complaint may fear conflict or reprisals. Maybe they genuinely don't know who to talk to about certain problems or issues. At times the individual is simply trying to get his or her way in a conflicted situation, but stays underground to maintain the appearance of “not causing trouble.” The truth about anonymous communication is that the person fostering such communication doesn't desire reconciliation; they simply desire to have their opinion or point of view put forth without any challenge.

One of the ways in which we can lead and educate our congregations to avoid unhealthy forms of communication is to assist our leaders, elders, boards or personnel committees to be clear in their policies and practices that they will neither receive nor take seriously anonymous complaints—letters, phone messages, e-mails, or pass-through communication.

In an article by Kibbie Simmons Ruth, Karen A. McClintock they make this statement, “Anonymous communication is damaging to everyone in the congregation because feelings are often expressed but cannot be resolved. Wounds are named but cannot be healed. Criticism is offered without the chance to explore the possibility of healing. To stop anonymous feedback, clergy and lay leaders need to agree that it is counterproductive. You can't apologize to anonymous. Anonymous will remain angry or sad until he or she

comes forward with the truth. Anonymous others cannot and should not be considered when making leadership decisions or resolving conflicts.”

Their advice for leaders and congregations alike is to remember that a congregation can greatly reduce negative criticism and unresolved hard feelings with simple and clear boundaries that does not allow for or operate with unhealthy forms of communication that hurt, wound and cause divisiveness and inhibit our being on mission. When asked to respond to anonymously obtained information, leaders need to simply refuse to consider it substantive until the anonymous person is willing to more clearly own his or her concern. While clearer boundaries and transparency in communication may cause initial negative aspects of congregational life to come into the light, they also reveal the strength, commitment, and love that bind the congregation together—ultimately giving more courage to faith leaders to address any negative dynamics that hinder their faith journey as a community.

If we are going to be healthy growing congregations that are genuinely reaching our communities for Christ with the Good News, we need to be persistent and consistent in modeling and requiring good communication practices. We insist on speaking directly with those we have issues with and those who have issues with us. We refuse to carry a message or send a message from one person to another. When there is hurt, woundedness, or conflict, we seek to listen, hear and resolve the matters that are keeping us from fulfilling our mission of reaching our communities for Christ. We refuse to complain about a third party or listen to others when they try to pull us into that kind of dysfunctional conversation. We must refuse to participate in anonymous communication but instead seek to reconcile and heal so that genuine koinonia, united mission, and personal commitment to loving as God loves is once again restored and the church lives like the church God intended her to be!