



# Healthy Communication

By Jeannette Flynn

Finally, my brothers and sisters, always think about what is true. Think about what is noble, right and pure. Think about what is lovely and worthy of respect. If anything is excellent or worthy of praise, think about those kinds of things. Do what you have learned or received or heard from me. Follow my example. And the God of peace will be with you. Philippians 4:8 – 9

You've seen them – those crazy bulletin bloopers that remind us just how hard “good communication” really is at times.

- **The pastor will preach his farewell message, after which the choir will sing, "Break Forth Into Joy."**
- **During the absence of our pastor, we enjoyed the rare privilege of hearing a good sermon when J.F. Stubbs supplied our pulpit.**
- **Scouts are saving aluminum cans, bottles, and other items to be recycled. Proceeds will be used to cripple children.**
- **Let us join David and Lisa in the celebration of their wedding and bring their happiness to a conclusion.**
- **The concert held in Fellowship Hall was a great success. Special thanks are due to the minister's daughter, who labored the whole evening at the piano, which as usual fell upon her.**

I'm not really sure what some of these announcements are trying to communicate, but they're great for a Monday morning chuckle... especially if they weren't in YOUR worship folder!

However, unlike these humorous mis-attempts at communication, I have been amazed at how many times unhealthy communication within the courts of the church has been the catalyst of conflict, hurt, division and the barrier to forward progress. Unhealthy communication patterns create a culture where blame replaces responsibility, and where power distortions bring growth to a slow and steady halt. This problem doesn't seem to be isolated to only large congregations or just small churches. There doesn't seem to be any connection to whether it is a traditional church or a contemporary congregation. In fact, my experience has proven to me that unhealthy communication is an issue that affects pastors and lay people alike in all kinds of congregations.

*Unhealthy communication patterns create a culture where blame replaces responsibility*

People complain that they do not know the information they need; information is misinterpreted – accidentally or on purpose; rumors and gossip flourish; private material has been leaked publicly. At times pastors and/or congregants demand to hear sensitive

information that they have no need or right to know and do not know how to handle; in other situations people lack the information they do need to make reasonable decisions at a congregational meeting. The informal, and sometimes unhelpful, nature of congregational communication leads to frequent joking about church business being done in the parking lot rather than at official meetings, or about the speed with which congregational rumors fly through the phone lines or on the internet.

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It is so frustrating to try to make decisions, move forward, develop ministry only to have it sabotaged by unhealthy communication. It is discouraging that periodically undercurrents erupt, unrest surfaces and yet no one seems to know why. It seems that you can never track the source of misinformation. People misuse "confidentiality" as a method of passing along false or hurtful information with no opportunity (or desire) for resolution. I have tried to figure out if there is formula for disseminating information that would eliminate negative and unhealthy communication and

determined that there is no organizational or administrative blueprint that will prevent such activity.

If we are going to create healthier congregational systems, both clergy and congregational leaders need to acknowledge the damage their communication patterns have created in the past and correct them in the various relationships of the body. Over the next few weeks I would like to share some lessons that I pray might be helpful to share with your leaders or your congregation. These lessons can change the environment of not only congregational life, but when they are honored in our daily lives they can improve our work places and family communication as well.

The first step in creating a healthy communication culture is to begin to build a culture of trust. If there is a history of conflict or hurt in your congregation, or with your staff or just among some of the brothers and sisters in the body, this will take some perseverance and work. But the dividends are HUGE!

Trust fuels productivity. A culture characterized by trust attracts healthy people. You will never know who you can trust until you trust them. Andy Stanley notes, "The longer you refuse to trust people, the longer that untrustworthy people can hide in your organization. Trusting is risky. Refusing to trust is riskier."

It will come as no surprise to you that developing a culture of trust begins with a leader. Our actions and attitudes are rapidly conveyed to the congregation. Those attitudes speak way more loudly than what we simply say. Building a healthy culture of trust may mean taking a fearless inventory of our own lack of faith and confidence in those we serve or in our fellow pastors and leaders and then being willing to take the necessary steps to resolve that disconnect.

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When you choose to trust, it also means that we must choose to confront in love and be willing to believe the best. If you want to build a culture of trust, you must confront fairly and quickly and refuse to sit on it. Before I decide to assume the worst about someone in a congregation or a fellow pastor, I should at least ask for the facts about the matter I am concerned about.

The second part of creating a culture of trust as a leader is that we ourselves must be trustworthy. Worthy of trust does not mean being “perfect”. It does mean however that as a leader I understand the significance of following through with what I have said I would do. It also means that I am alert and aware that when I don’t follow through or if misunderstandings have taken place, as the leader, I am quick to talk to you about it. (Matthew 5:23 – 24)

I love to listen to good sermons or conferences – in person or on CD’s. Recently I wrote down these **5 Essential Commitments of Trust** that Andy Stanley gave during a Catalyst Conference in Alpharetta, Georgia. They are excellent. Think with me on these things!

1. I will choose to believe the best about others.
2. When other people assume the worst about you, I will come to your defense.
3. If what I experience in working with you begins to erode my trust, I will come directly to you to talk about it.
4. When I am convinced I will not be able to deliver on a promise, I tell you ahead of time and ask how we can work that out.
5. When you confront me about the gaps of trust that my actions or words have created, I will not become defensive or resentful, I will tell you the truth.

Join me in working to create healthier cultures of communication in our lives, families and congregations by thinking, praying and acting on these matters.

Praying for you to have a great and healthy summer!