

Cleaning Up Bad Communication Habits

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by **Kibbie Simmons Ruth , Karen A. McClintock**

Of the several negative communication patterns congregations practice, three habits are particularly problematic: triangulation, pass-through communication, and anonymous feedback. While these three may be strategies for getting needs met, they all block rather than help healthy communication. Even if well intentioned, they are deadly habits that in the long run allow people to dodge accountability, gain power, and alienate others. Once everyone understands how to break these habits, those who persist will eventually have to stop or they will become so uncomfortable and isolated that they will leave the congregation. To clean up bad communication habits, congregations can do three things: reduce the triangulation, eliminate pass-through communication, and reject anonymous feedback.

Reducing Triangulation

While people often suggest that venting is good for the soul, it is actually not very productive. Venting to someone about a third person is simply an avoidance technique that creates what is known in counseling theory as a relationship triangle, or triangulation. Triangulation is talking about feelings, opinions, or personal issues regarding some person or group with a third party instead of with the person or group actually concerned. Relationship triangles usually involve three people who each take one of three roles: victim, persecutor, and rescuer. Once in a triangle, people change places among its three points. The only way to stop the triangulation is for each person to communicate his or her feelings, concerns, or opinions directly to the other.

Of course, the best communication strategy is to avoid being recruited into a triangle in the first place. But so often well-intentioned faith leaders and congregants listen to another person's concerns, feelings, or opinions, then realize they inadvertently let themselves be co-opted into involvement, sometimes even taking sides. Once in a triangle, escape may take some courage and clarity but is possible. The triangulated person can redirect the other person straight to the appropriate individual or committee—the one actually involved in the personal issues or the one that can address the concern or mend the relationship. A three-way conversation sometimes helps, but only if the third party facilitates without taking sides or having an agenda, without speaking for one of the other parties, and without adding to the emotional drama.

Eliminating Pass-through Communication

Some congregations get in the habit of pass-through communication. To get a message to someone, you tell someone else. Like triangulation, pass-through information also involves three parties, but the content of the information is less emotional and personal—sometimes as simple as the expected outcomes of a meeting.

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. Like the children's telephone game, the content usually becomes distorted and often the necessary action delayed. Miscommunication may occur unintentionally, but individuals or groups also can use pass-through communication to divide congregations and stir up conflict. 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 the direct message. And like triangulation, pass-through communication must be stopped for healthy congregational functioning.

Again, the individual being asked to pass something on has 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. The intended messenger needs to clarify why that person is talking to him or her instead of the individual who needs the information. If he or she is dodging responsibility for direct communication, the intended messenger should be all the more determined to stop the pass-through effort.

Rejecting Anonymous Feedback

Why would someone give feedback anonymously? There are several reasons. Anonymity allows people to avoid accountability for the content. The individual with the complaint or accusation may also fear reprisals. Sometimes the individual simply doesn't know whom to talk to about a concern. At other times the individual is trying to get his or her way in a conflicted situation, but stays underground to maintain the appearance of being in a harmonious relationship with other congregants.

Personnel committees and other groups that oversee pastoral ministry must 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. Slanderous comments in particular should not be disseminated by the recipient, not even to the clergy person or any others on a committee, unless the content contains serious threats or requires a legal response. Congregations can waste a lot of energy on slanderous static that interferes with their listening to and addressing real issues. If e-mails are sent from unknown sources, they can be stopped by a trusted leader sending a letter to the congregation asking everyone to block the anonymous sender of the "junk" information and to ignore the content.

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.

A congregation can greatly reduce negative criticism and unresolved hard feelings with these simple and clear boundaries: no triangulation, no pass-through information, and no anonymous communication. When recruited into a communication triangle or to pass information on to another person, leaders need the mantra, "Please tell the person (or committee) directly yourself." 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. Congregational communication can sometimes hide secrets, agendas, and conflict. While clearer

boundaries and transparency in communication may cause 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.

How to Clean Up Bad Communication Habits

- Speak directly to the person or committee that the issue concerns.
- Refuse to carry a message from one person or group to another.
- If two people talk with you about each other, offer to meet with both of them together or to find them a mediator.
- If a person complains to you about someone else but refuses to directly talk with the person to resolve the problem, ask him or her to stop talking to you or others about it.
- Reduce venting by first listening and then asking what action the person will undertake to resolve the problem.
- Refuse to take nonspecific or anonymous feedback seriously.

Adapted from

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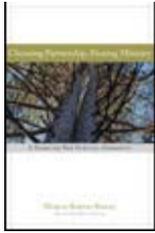
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[Healthy Disclosure: Solving Communication Quandaries in Congregations](#) by Kibbie Simmons Ruth and Karen A. McClintock

Knowledge is power, and the way knowledge is shared in a congregation can build up or break down community. When congregational leaders are sensitive to the ways that information should be shared, the congregation can become safe and strong. *Healthy Disclosure* is filled with step-by-step ideas for handling different types of sensitive material.



[Choosing Partnership, Sharing Ministry: A Vision for New Spiritual Community](#) by
Marcia Barnes Bailey

Partnership invites us on a journey that can transform us as leaders, as human beings, and as the church. Bailey invites pastors and congregations to a new understanding of ministry, leadership, and the church that challenges hierarchy by fully sharing responsibilities, risks, and rewards in mutual ministry. Partnership unleashes the Spirit to create a new vision and reality among us, moving us one step closer to living into God's reign.

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