

# Healthy Communication for Churches

by Rev. Gail E Monsma, based on material from Rev. Dr. John Stewart<sup>1</sup>

## STEP 1: PLAY FAIR IN DISAGREEMENTS

Healthy disagreement means focusing and sticking to the issue(s) at hand which can be complicated and unresolved. In a nutshell, it is the difference between fighting fair or fighting dirty. Disagreeing should not get personal. This means agreeing to avoid attacking the personality or personal traits of the other as well as watching the tone of our voice and personal gestures. When we fight dirty, people seek to defend their personhood and the issue gets lost in the process.

It is also important to realize that today, the use of social media with Facebook, email, and texting all add complicating layers to the discussions. Some issues just need to be handled face to face. Anytime someone feels a topic should not be conducted via technology they should feel free to call a halt to an internet discussion stating that it needs to be finished in person or in a meeting, and all involved need to honor this. Using capitalized words in social media communication should be avoided; it is often perceived as shouting, and shuts down communication.

## STEP 2: TALK ABOUT MISUNDERSTANDINGS WITHIN 48 HOURS

When a conflict arises, a perceived slight, a misunderstanding, or boundary crossing, we need to make every attempt to personally address this within a 48 hour period. Going public sooner than later, is infinitely better than repressing or denying. There is a reason the apostle Paul says, “Do not let the sun go down upon your wrath.” To delay can bring unwarranted stress, bring other issues into a situation, and at times make a mountain out of a mole hill. Trust, honesty, and mutual respect require addressing conflict and misunderstanding before suspicion and resentment builds. This step also implies that the appropriate parties will first try to resolve the conflict together before they widen the issue to involve others. The more we practice this, the easier it gets, and we grow in our communication styles as trust builds.

## STEP 3: AVOID ALL TRIANGLED CRITICISMS

We need to attempt to challenge all triangled criticisms. Most of us are familiar with triangulation. Unhealthy workplaces are full of this, but even in the best of settings, triangled criticism can quickly become a virus.

The classic maneuver of “triangulation” emerges when “A” complains to “B” about “C.” Often “A” wants “B” to “straighten out” person “C,” or perhaps just listen to them complain about “C.” We (B) need to encourage the complainer (A) to address his/her complaint directly to “C.” This is no easy discipline, but it does work. The key to this is accountability: “B” must kindly, in Christian love, inform “A” that he/she needs to approach “C.” If this pattern continues “B” should inform “A” that they will check back with them to see if they have spoken to “C.” At times it may even be necessary to say, “I can no longer listen to you talk about “C.”” Please keep in mind, that if need be, there is an Administration Committee at our church to help with this process.

## CONCLUSION

Without a doubt, it takes difficult and persistent work to live together following the way of Christ. However, when congregations practice open and accountable communication, trust builds and all sorts of exciting possibilities open up in mutual problem solving and living together—we become open to the Holy Spirit calling us forward as the body of Christ!

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<sup>1</sup> John W. Stewart, *Leaders' Proven Practices: Don't Leave Home without Them*, Princeton Seminary Youth Institute Lecture, 2005

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