



BEYOND THE BULLETIN

A Communication Strategy for Congregations

From Session 1: Attitude

Bible Conversation: Love One Another

It's delightful to hear Jesus say, "Love one another." If only he'd stopped there. But he didn't. He added "as I have loved you." Quite a high standard. In today's Bible Conversation we are reminded of the benchmark Jesus set and the reason he felt so strongly about it.

Bible Conversation

Suggested time: 10 minutes

Step 1 (group)

First, a little context on John 13 for this conversation. Jesus and the disciples gather for the day of preparation for the Passover. Jesus surprises them by washing their feet. Peter makes his famous protest but then agrees to let Jesus wash his feet. Afterward Jesus asks:

Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord, and Teacher have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. (vv. 12b-14)

But the evening isn't over. Jesus breaks the bread, passes the cup, and then talks about his betrayal. He tells Judas to go and do what he needs to do. Jesus knows that his time with the disciples is short. He leaves them with this instruction.

I give you a new commandment that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another. (v. 34)

Step 2 (pairs)

Respond to the questions below.

- What does it mean to be a witness?
- We witness to our love for one another when we _____.

Step 3 (group)

Let's discuss our responses to the questions in step 2. How are our observations similar? How are they different?

Prayer

Let us pray. God of love and grace, help us to support each other even through situations of betrayal and grief. Thank you for reminding us that our behavior is a witness to others. Help us be instruments of your love for all people as we lead our congregation. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Respectful Communication: Attitude, Structure, and Process

We witness with our words, our facial expressions, body postures, and behaviors. We share information through our words, and we share our feelings through our attitude. Respectful leaders maintain a calm attitude, share a clear plan, and eagerly involve the congregation. The result is that members participate and feel valued. Leaders unintentionally show a lack of respect for their members when they:

- 1) share an idea without a plan and don't involve the congregation in a meaningful way;
- 2) make and implement their plans without involving the members;
- 3) make a plan, involve the congregation, and then drop the whole thing with no explanation.

When any of these things happen, members are likely to respond with the same level of disrespect.

The communication strategy we'll use in this resource paves the way for us to show our respect by helping us to pay attention to our attitudes as leaders, to the structure we build to plan a project, and to the process we use to involve the congregation.

Let's learn a bit about each element, and then we'll dive into them one at a time.

Attitude is the emotional state of the leaders and the congregation. A leader's emotions can spread to the congregation and vice versa. This resource will give us tools to calm ourselves and the congregation.

Structure frames the work itself. A well-designed structure helps leaders share clear answers to questions such as: What issue do we need to address? Why is that issue important? When do we need to accomplish our goal?

Process is the way we involve the congregation in the project. It focuses on how and when we'll communicate with the congregation and engage them in activities to generate the feedback we need to inform our next steps.

We can apply this strategy to any situation, from conducting an annual meeting to redecorating the lobby. Let's use the annual meeting as an example.

Attitude: Some of us are concerned that the annual meeting will include a fight over the budget like it did last year. Many of us have heard this concern raised by members of the congregation.

Structure: We plan to address our concerns about an antagonistic annual meeting by presenting the budget ahead of time. We'll distribute the budget three weeks ahead and hold a budget discussion two weeks before the meeting. Then we can plan how to proceed based on what we learn from the budget discussion.

Process: Our members need to know that we want them involved in the budget process. We'll design a budget discussion format that shows we are open to their ideas about our finances. We'll create a communication plan to engage the whole congregation.

We don't have to understand the finer points of this strategy yet. We'll look at each of them more closely as we go through this resource. We'll start with attitude.

From Session 2: Structure

Effective communication shows respect for our members not only through our attitude, but through the information we share with the congregation. We turn to the Structure element of our communication strategy to learn how to think through and share the vital details of our project.

Lutheran pastor, consultant, and author Peter Steinke notes that "good structure controls anxiety." Structure keeps anxiety from spreading because it addresses a key cause, the unknown. People are less anxious when they know what's going on. The pillars of good structure are purpose, issues, goals, objectives, action plans, timeline, and decision rule. Clearly framing and sharing these details will begin to relieve the unease under anxiety.

Let's look at each pillar as they are more generally described.

Purpose

- Articulate who we are and why we need to work on our project—that is, how our project aligns with our values, mission, and vision.

Issues

- Explain the problem our project will solve.

Goals

- Lay out what we hope to accomplish.

Objectives

- Break down the goal into small objectives that will lead us to achieve our goal.

Action Plan

- Develop one action plan for each objective.
- Decide who will do what and by when so that we achieve our objective on time.

Timeline

- Schedule each objective to determine when we expect to achieve our goal.
- Understand that the timeline may have to change as we learn more along the way.

Decision rule

- Be clear about who—the council/team or the congregation— will make decisions.

From Session 3: Process

As we read in the introduction, a key cause of anxiety in any organization is the fear that leaders are making decisions without the input of the group. Calls for transparency, fears of abuse of power, hurt feelings from feeling excluded are all triggered by anxiety. Beyond offering bulletin announcements and newsletter articles, we need to give our members an opportunity to speak. And we need to act on what we hear.

Channels of Communication

Everett Rogers is a sociologist and expert on how ideas spread through a group. He maintains that there are two communication channels: mass media and personal relationships. Anything in print, online, or spoken to a large group of people can be considered “mass media” because someone is communicating with a group all at one time. Relational communication happens in conversations between two people or a very small group of folks who know each other. Here’s a truth that advertisers know:

Mass media *informs*. Relationship *persuades*. We need both.

Mass media is great for informing people, but it doesn’t persuade very many of us. Personal interaction persuades. Research shows that only 10 percent of the population

is persuaded to do something because of information they learned through mass media. Ninety percent are persuaded by relationships. The person communicating through

mass media can't hear the response of their recipients. People on the receiving end don't have the opportunity to ask questions or express concerns. They are informed, but not persuaded. It's within the give and take of conversation that most people make decisions. The smaller the congregation, the more this is true. Members think, "Our congregation is like a family. If someone wants me to attend that event, or do something to help, they will talk to me about it."

It may sound manipulative to say that we want to persuade people. Don't worry, we aren't going to use any deceptive tricks to get folks to do what we want. Instead, we're going to show we value people by treating them with love. In a strong family, each member is important and their opinion impacts group decisions. So, we're going to talk to our people and let their responses guide what we do next. Because just like in a family, when we don't, people's feelings get hurt.

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