

## Reflections On Congregational Life

# COMMUNICATION®

by  
Peter Rudowski  
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One theory of communications maintains that there are four forms through which a message can be sent: 1. facts, 2. feelings, 3. stories, and 4. mythology. Of course a message can have elements of all four forms but usually one form dominates. As in all things, there are pluses and minuses to each form of communication.

#### Communications through facts

Communication occurs when facts are stated. The plus side of communication through facts is that facts are generally safe. Little or no risk of misunderstanding exists when facts are quoted. Two plus two equals four. I may not like the fact that two plus two equals four, but I cannot argue against the conclusion.

The negative side of communication through facts is that facts are usually not memorable. I think of the weather segment of the local news. The weather person gives the viewer lots of facts; i.e., the highs and lows of today's temperature, average temperatures for this date, and what the wind chill factor is going to be. But who remembers those facts once the weather segment is over? Unfortunately, graphs and pictures do not always help the memory. For the most part, facts are not memorable and they certainly do not inspire one into action.

#### Communication through feelings

Feelings can be added to facts. The plus side of adding feelings to the communication process is that feelings are more memorable than facts. I remember the emotional responses an individual has to certain facts. This fact makes so and so happy so I quote it a lot. Or, this fact drives so and so crazy so I use it sparingly.

The negative side of using feelings is that feel-

ings invite commentary which may lead to arguments and disagreements; i.e., "How can you be happy with the election results?"

#### Communication through stories

Communication occurs through stories. For a story to be heard and believed it must be truthful and accurate.

Stories convey what has happened and what is happening now. They reveal what is important and a priority for a congregation. For example, the story of a congregation's founding, and stories about two successful ministries implemented in the last 10 years are the quickest way for a new pastor or member to know a congregation. These stories reveal who are the permission givers/withholders and the decision makers.

The plus side of stories is that they are memorable. People listen to a good, well-crafted story. To make the point, I was told in seminary that I could repeat the same sermon year after the year and no one would notice as long as I changed the stories or illustrations within the sermon. I took this statement as a matter of fact, I did not like it, and at the same time I suspected the observation was true. As further proof, when I tell stories about myself from the pulpit, the sanctuary becomes very quiet.

I cannot identify a downside to a good story. If there is a downside, it is that it takes a lot of effort to craft a story that fits well with the message that is being delivered.

#### Communication through mythology

Mythology is used to reveal the purpose and values of an organization. Mythology explains the "why" a congregation exists and why it does what it does. Unlike stories, mythology does not

depend upon historical accuracy to fulfill its purpose.

The plus side of mythology is that it is remembered. For example, if mythology comes in the form of a fable; i.e., we remember the hare and the tortoise and the values, attitudes, and life-style of each.

The negative side of mythology is that it is often rejected because it is not historically accurate, it often uses fictional characters, it can use strange imagery to convey a strong message.

### **Communication within the congregation**

How should the four forms of communication be used in a congregation? To answer this question, I will look at the forms in which financial information is communicated and the purpose behind the communication.

In most congregations, the treasurer and/or the finance committee report to the governing board the receipts, expenditures, and how the receipts and expenditures compare to expected income and expenditures. For this type of reporting, facts are the most appropriate form of communication. The communication of facts is as follows:

*"In March, we received \$11,000. In the first quarter of this year, we received \$29,000 or 23% of expected income for the year to meet our annual budget obligations of \$125,000. According to a giving pattern established over the past 10 years, it is normal for us to receive 23% of our total receipts in the first quarter." Using our normal giving pattern as a bases, we expect to receive 100% of our budget by the end of the year."*

What will be remembered from this report is that the congregation is on track to receive 100% of the funds needed to meet annual budget obligations.

It is my belief that giving statements (quarterly or otherwise) should never be sent without a thank you from the (senior) pastor. The purpose of this communication is three-fold. First, it connects the donor to the ministries of the congregation. Second, it encourages future and perhaps even greater giving. Third, it informs the donor about the status of recorded contributions in comparison with his or her pledge. To fulfill the first two of

these purposes, the use of facts will be ineffective. What is required in communication to donors is a story.

The story in this communication reveals the difference the donor's contribution has made in the life of an individual or the congregation. For example,

*"Because of your giving, we were able to provide scholarships to three children to attend church camp. Upon their return home, one child told me of how he came to see Jesus in a whole new way. He said ....."*

The fact stated in this letter is that three children went to camp. The story emphasizes the difference camp made in knowing and understanding Jesus.

After the story is told, the letter concludes with, "You made a difference in the life of this child and other children just like him." Those receiving the letter will not remember how many children went to camp but they will remember how camp made a difference in one boy's life.

Finally, if the purpose of the communication is to explain why members give, mythology is needed. Remember mythology explains the "why." Here we quote biblical teachings and truth. If stories are the only way we communicate the need for members to financially give, the church is no different than any other non-profit charitable organization. The scriptures take us to a deeper level; namely, we give because God first gave to us.

In conclusion, communication comes in four forms. Choosing the right form to send a message is essential if the communication is to fulfill its purpose. Facts are good for reporting. Feelings are good to start a conversation. Stories are good to relay what is happening. And, mythology explains the why.

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*Peter Rudowski served as a parish pastor for 33 years. In this capacity, he developed knowledge and skills in parish administration and organizational systems. He now serves as a consultant to pastors and congregations. He is also the author of CONNECTING THE DOTS: Ministering To Your Congregation Through Its Organizational System published by Xlibris - order via the internet at xlibris.com He can be contacted for a consultation at: phone 513-791-8920 or e-mail address: prudowski@fuse.net*