

Communication is the transfer of ideas, feelings and information from one person or institution to another, which builds a sense of understanding and community. Communication empowers people for ministry. Communication within the church also keeps people informed, supports people and programs, provides publicity, sensitizes people, provides a forum for expression and concern about issues, and builds a sense of community. Communication is helped if it is attractive enough to gain acceptance, clear enough to be understood properly and meaningful enough to initiate action. Communication can be used to bind people together into a cohesive group.

## History and Background

Communication is as much a part of our daily living as breathing. An annual meeting, a poem, a conversation in a church parking lot, a poster, a screaming siren, a clerical collar and the Sunday morning worship service all are forms of communication.

There are several ways to look at communication:

## Direction of Communication

Feedback is part of all communication, as the purpose of communicating is to evoke a

response. The kind of feedback can vary greatly according to the form and context of the message.

- **One-way transmission** This happens when a person communicates ideas and information to one or more persons without seeking a direct response. A sermon or an announcement from the pulpit is an example of one-way transmission. You hope people are listening and will act on what you say, but you are not looking for an immediate verbal reaction. One-way transmission is limited, for it is difficult to know that a message has been received. Unless someone snores during the sermon or says something to the pastor about the message, there may be little way to know whether the message is being received. Newsletters, buttons, the appearance of the building, posters and anthems are examples of one-way transmissions used in churches.
- **One-way transmission inviting direct feedback.** This occurs when one person provides information and asks people to respond directly. Sometimes they don't communicate the response verbally. Announcements may say "There will be a sign-up sheet on the bulletin board. Please put your name on it if you are interested in attending the retreat." A common method of one-way transmission inviting direct feedback is saying "Everyone in favor of the motion please raise your hand."

- **Interactive transmission** This takes place when everyone who is part of the communication experience participates actively to express opinions, convey thoughts and feelings and get responses. It's obvious that talking on the phone is two-way transmission. After people have signed up for the retreat, a telephone call allows them to ask questions, say what they want to happen there and find out whether their expectations will be met. Getting all the people together who showed interest in the retreat and letting them talk together is another example of interactive transmission; so are prayer circles, coffee hours, hymn sings and fellowship groups.

## Reinforcement

Often information about one subject is communicated in several ways. That's helpful. The retreat may be announced in the bulletin and from the pulpit, described in the newsletter, and people who sign up may get a mailing. It doesn't help much to say the same thing over and over again. For instance, having announcements read from the bulletin can be disconcerting for those who have already read them silently. But you could say something about the retreat's purpose in the bulletin and ask for sign ups from the pulpit. Say it more than once, using different methods of communication, and people probably will hear you.

## Verbal and Nonverbal Communication

We can also think about communication as being verbal or nonverbal. Verbal communication has to do with words, spoken or printed, and nonverbal communication is everything else that communicates. A pastor who chooses to wear a robe and stand behind a pulpit communicates something different from a pastor in a sweater in the aisle, and each may be appropriate. You communicate by your facial expression, by the way you arrange chairs for a meeting, by clapping after a song, by colors on posters and by your choice of standing or sitting while leading a discussion.

If you want to communicate well, your verbal and nonverbal communications must support each other. What's a person to believe if you say "I'm here to help you," but you keep jotting notes on a list of things to do while you talk? Can visitors believe the bulletin that says "We are a friendly church," if people hardly speak to them?

## Formal and Informal Communication

Systems that have been set up to communicate are where formal communication takes place: through minutes of meetings, in the newsletter or bulletin and through reports to the congregation. While formal

communication is going on, so is informal communication.

Casual conversation about the retreat—"I went last time and it was great!" is informal, unlike a written report on the retreat for the newsletter.

Informal communication will always go on, but formal communication may not. The newsletter may not be printed on time or a report may be omitted in a committee meeting.

When this happens it puts a burden on the informal, which is not always accurate. Ideas and information may be distorted, and the message may not reach everyone.

## Participants in Communication

**Senders and receivers** participate in communication through some kind of medium. Sometimes the message that the sender intended does not get communicated to the receiver. One of the reasons is that there are **filters** that distort what is being received. This can range from static on a podium microphone to values, past experiences and attitudes that affect what the receiver hears.

Besides those personal filters, there are some external filters that can distort the message. I may really want to listen to you, but if you go on and on in a hot room after lunch, I'll probably be concentrating on staying awake rather than listening to what you are saying.

## Issues Facing the Church

- When something is everyone's responsibility, it often ends up being impossible to accomplish. Who in your church has the task of increasing your church's overall ability to communicate effectively?
- Sometimes lots of attention are given to communicating the facts, but little is communicated about feelings. How can feelings be communicated?
- Informal communication follows a network. Certain people talk to certain other people. Some people never really talk to the pastor but send messages through someone else. The network is to some extent related to power. How effective is the network of communication in your church?

## Action Suggestions

- Practice thinking about (a) ideas, feelings or information you want to convey, (b) filters likely to be present and (c) how non-verbal messages could contribute to communication.
- Practice asking questions that help clarify communication and making comments that help the sender know what you are receiving. Use materials in **Called to Care: A notebook for Lay Caregivers** about active listening (available from your Resource Center or United Church of Christ Resources).

- Plan communication to let your church members know about an annual meeting, keeping in mind what you have learned about methods and types of communication. How does your imaginary plan differ from what actually happened when you last planned an annual meeting? What does the comparison show?
- Select three or four printed materials prepared by your church. Can you see anything that suggests filters that might inhibit their usefulness? What is communicated by the nonverbal part?
- Track the communication about two or three events in the church's life. What were the methods of formal communication? Did you encounter any informal communication? How effective was the communication?
- Gather a few church members and walk through the church to see whether you all agree upon what is being communicated.
- Bring together committee chairpersons to discuss communication in your church.

## Questions

- Think of five filters that seem to cause problems in your church.
- How do the music, language, seating arrangements and other dynamics affect the communication of your worship service?

Review the following to determine how they do or could impact communication within your church:

- Photographs.
- Study groups.
- Facial expressions.
- Announcements.
- Charts.
- Prayer circles.
- Newsletters.
- Fellowship groups.
- Annual meetings.
- Coffee hours.
- Committee meetings.
- Bulletin inserts.
- Questionnaires.
- Colors.
- Radio and television.
- Seating arrangements.
- E-mail.
- Personal notes.
- Posters.
- Worship.
- Buttons.
- Proposals.
- Suppers.
- Building appearance.
- Skits.
- Visitations.
- Newspaper articles.