
3 KEYS

COMMUNICATION: DIRECT & INDIRECT

On a body such as a Vestry, there will be differences of opinion. In the wider parish family there will be differences of opinion. It cannot be stressed enough that the only proper way -- to one's own soul's health and for the upbuilding of the Body of Christ -- to deal with issues that divide is to speak directly and openly with the person or persons with whom one disagrees.

It is so human, because of our fallenness, to fear direct communication. Consequently people too often speak behind the backs of those with whom they have disagreement. Such indirect communication (sometimes called gossip, backbiting, sabotage, etc) is unseemly within the church. Yet, to be honest, we must expect it since the metaphor which describes the local church best is that of a family, the very place where we learn our basic (and sometimes unhealthy) communication patterns. Persons who are in crisis often work out their problems through the church family. Members of the Vestry have a special responsibility to set a high moral tone and not allow themselves to become embroiled in "indirect communication." It is always best to point persons who have disagreements with another person directly to that person. Being the third party in a discussion (called "communication triangles") is rarely constructive. It is truly a ministry of healing to urge persons with such "baggage" to go directly to those who trouble them.

As pertains to meetings of the Vestry, direct communication means the full expression of one's thoughts and feelings at meetings and not later disparaging the work of the Vestry outside the confines of the meeting room. This later type of behavior manifests itself in small "parking lot discussions" or in telephone calls. Full participation will mean that such *sub rosa* methods are never necessary. Healthy Communication benefits the Body of Christ.

ANONYMOUS INFORMATION

The another healthy operating principle has further implications for positive, open, above-board communication. It is our practice never to introduce anonymous suggestions or critiques into vestry discussions (or really, for that matter, all church discussions). These are the type which generally run: "One or two people have said such and such to me." or "There are some people who do (or don't) like such and such."

Anonymous comments are *never* helpful or healthy in a Godly environment. In order to introduce any comment from anyone else, the "owner" of the thought must be stated. If a person is not willing to have his or her name associated with the thought or suggestion, it is not worthy of consideration. The "owner" of an opinion is always invited to present his or her comment in person.

This approach will assist us in keeping all communication clear, direct and clean, as well as helping us avoid those dreaded communication triangles.

CONSENSUS FORMATION ON A VESTRY

Because the vestry speaks with one voice, it is imperative that all decisions be reached through a process of deliberation that is fair, thoughtful, and open to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. It must be a process where all information has been provided to the vestry and where each vestry member has been given full opportunity to communicate his opinions, views, and judgments, in the expectation that every other vestry member will listen attentively and will seriously consider what he hears. When a decision is reached, every vestry member

will be able to witness to the integrity of the decision, because all concerns have been heard and taken into account. Consensus has been achieved, not because everyone agrees with the final decision, but because everyone has participated in a process of frank and respectful dialogue and can thus take responsibility for the decision.

A consensual decision-making process requires a firm commitment by *every* vestry member to participate in the deliberations and discussions of the vestry. All information, including most especially dissenting viewpoints, must be shared. This is sometimes called the “parking lot” principle. All too often in vestries, significant discussion happens *after* a decision has been reached, usually in the parking lot after the meeting between those who have “lost” the vote. Consensus requires, however, that all meaningful debate occur at the table in the presence of the entire vestry. The vestry needs the contributions of every member. All viewpoints must be communicated and seriously considered. If there is disagreement, that disagreement must be clearly articulated. It is only through acknowledging our disagreement that true agreement can be found, only by dealing with our disunity that genuine unity can be established. Consensual decision-making requires the commitment of the rector and vestry to frank, honest, and respectful dialogue within the bonds of Christian love. All opinions are welcome. All opinions will be heard and genuinely considered. No opinion will be dismissed or ignored. The unity of the vestry thus requires an environment that is truly safe, where each individual knows that his personal integrity will be protected, even in the midst of passionate disagreement. The practice of civility and mutual respect establishes the conditions necessary for the free and honest expression by every vestry member.

Before a decision is taken on any given resolution, each vestry member should be able to attest to a fourfold norms:

- 1) I believe I understand your position.**
- 2) I believe you understand my position.**
- 3) I will support the decision, whether I agree with it or not, because it was arrived at openly and fairly.**
- 4) I will accept responsibility for the outcome of the decision, whether I agree with it or not, because it was arrived at openly and fairly.**

When each vestry member can make such a statement, consensus is achieved and the decision recorded as a consensus statement of the Vestry.

Precisely because vestry decisions are reached by a consensual process that is prayerful, deliberate, and fair, vestry members may in good conscience support and enthusiastically represent these decisions to the parish, *even though they may personally disagree with a given decision*. The good of the community requires the leaders of that community to embrace a discipline of self-denial. Such self-denial and burden-bearing is the heart of Christian discipleship. “If anyone would come after me,” Jesus tells his followers, “he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” (Matt 16:24).

This discipline is well known in marriages and families. The good of a marriage often requires a spouse to join with and support the other, despite personal disagreement. This is the way of the cross, the embrace of the other in sacrificial love and solidarity. In the words of the Apostle: “As a prisoner of the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” (Eph 4:3)

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