



## Communication Strategies for Addressing Conflict in Congregations

By W. Craig Gilliam

Whenever I work with churches that are experiencing serious conflict, especially those that have reached the point of impasse, communication issues commonly emerge. Regularly, parishioners tell me that poor communications are at the root of their congregation's problems. Miscommunication, they say, has created much of the hurt.

But when people talk about lack of communication, they are almost always pointing to some deeper meaning that they might not even be aware of. In the simple act of communication — or miscommunication — much more is going on than we realize. Communication begins at the level of cognitive interaction, as two or more people try to exchange and understand thoughts and ideas. But for communication to be effective, it must move beyond pure cognition to the level of the heart or the emotions. This deeper communication involves the senses, body and soul.

Our efforts to communicate with one another are filled with and shaped by emotion. When we are anxious, for example, our ability to hear or connect genuinely with another human being lessens. To deepen connection or clarify communication, one must first lower the anxiety or static. Only then will we see a significant increase in our ability to hear and connect soulfully.

Such deep connections are essential for genuine communication. Without them, deep communication is unlikely to occur. In many congregations, communication problems stem from the phenomenon of “cut-offs” — breaks that occur in important relationships. When cut-offs occur in congregations and in families, anxiety heightens, the flow of information is skewed, the balance is upset, and the system undergoes a kind of shock.

The important role that connection plays is vividly illustrated by the words “communion” and “communication.” Deriving from a word that means “together,” these two words speak to the heart of our challenge. Communion means a merging of spirit. When we break bread together, we deepen the bonds among us, and when we eat the communion bread, we become one body in Christ. For communication to occur, some level of communion or connection is a must. When those two *comm* words happen, a third *comm* word constellates — community. Listening openly and honestly is a powerful way to communion/connection. In the silence of listening, we feel this *comm*, the silence of oneness.

Silence, of course, is also a prerequisite for true communication. If one person wants to be listened to and to connect with another, he or she must first practice silence and listen, assuring the other that he or she has been heard. Effective leaders not only listen for themselves, but also help others listen as well. Leaders create and hold open a space where individuals and whole communities can listen to each other. Listening is a sacred act that helps people connect, reconnect and be in communion.

One of the most effective ways I have found to help large groups move from conflict toward communication and communion is to host a “Listening to Each Other” session, designed to (1) model



non-reactive listening, (2) coach responsible speaking, (3) siphon toxicity out of the system, and (4) allow all to have a voice and to hear for themselves. The following are some of the strategies that I have found helpful in building connection, communication, communion and community:

**Listening authentically.** Listening is an art and a sacred act. You can be taught what to say and how to say it and even how to sit when you're saying it, but the heart of good listening is authenticity. People read not only your words, but what's going on inside you. If your stance isn't genuine, the words won't matter.

**Questioning.** Questions are powerful communication tools. The way they are used can change both the direction and outcome of a leader. Therefore, questions should be used with intention. The questions we ask determine the information we get and the role we will play in the situation we are encountering — conflict or impasse.

**Summarizing.** Summarizing what has been said can be very effective when used immediately after the parties have spoken. It can be used periodically throughout a conversation to clarify issues and help all parties know and feel they are heard.

**Acknowledging.** Acknowledging is a skill in which the listener hears and feeds back the emotion and content of the speaker's message.

**Reframing.** "Framing" is how one defines, describes or conceptualizes a conflict. "Reframing" means taking the essence of what the other person says and translating it into concepts that are more helpful. It involves walking down a new path and inviting the other person or persons to join you — to look at and think differently about the subject at hand.

**Silence.** Intentionally allow a moment of silence when emotions are high or someone says something that may require thought or a pause. Intentional silence is more powerful than just taking a breath or thinking about where to go next.

Finally, as suggested above, communication, like community, cannot be faked. It's not something you can do just because you are supposed to. When people are really communicating, they are listening and speaking because they are *curious* about what the other has to say. They genuinely want to know and, even more important, they *care* about the other's perspective.

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You can't talk your way out of something you behaved your way into. You have to behave your way out of it.

*Doug Conant*



## BOOK REVIEW

### Learning from the Mistakes of New Church Starts

By Lovett H. Weems, Jr.

Review of *Ten Common Mistakes Made by New Church Starts* by Jim Griffith and Bill Easum, Chalice Press, 2008.

This is a must-read for pastors founding new churches and those who work most closely with them. Jim Griffith and Bill Easum draw from years of experience with new church starts to outline concisely ten practices that can limit the success of new churches. Given the critical role new church starts play in reaching those not active in church, this resource can help those with the passion, energy, and wisdom to begin a new congregation.

Griffith and Easum pull together here what many have learned in their workshops, consulting, and coaching. In addition to naming the potential mistakes, they offer alternative directions for the planter as well as for supervisors and coaches working with new starts. A recap of the mistakes they cover is below.

- Church planters neglecting the Great Commandment to love God above all in pursuit of the Great Commission of making disciples
- Failing to take opposition seriously
- Not paying enough attention to the people in the context because of a preconceived image of what the church's vision should be
- Not having a critical mass before launching
- Vigorous evangelism ending after the early period
- No plan or people in place to work throughout the week with those who attend on Sunday
- Fear of talking about money
- Trying to offer ministries beyond the capacity of a new start
- Formalizing leadership too soon
- Trying to start a church with a borrowed vision

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### The Right Question

*Leaders do not need answers.  
Leaders must have the right questions.*

Deciding among competing priorities with limited time, energy, and resources is always a challenge in the church. One way to test an effort is to ask:

Even if we get the results we are seeking, will it justify the time, effort, and money we will have to put into this initiative?