

Communicating for Connection: Model and Teach

Pastors and other church leaders have the unique opportunity to model and teach effective communication, the kind that brings people together and helps them develop mutual understanding - even when they do not agree. Such understanding is essential for Disciples of Jesus Christ who want to transform the world. Jesus clearly taught us to love not only our neighbors, but our enemies as well. This means that instead of demonizing others, we try to understand what unmet needs motivate the feelings that drive their attitudes and behavior.

Much of what passes for communication today is simple one-upmanship, trying to prove the other person wrong. Instead of listening, many of us are sometimes so busy thinking about what we will say next that we do not really hear the words, much less the feelings behind them, of others. In the mid-twentieth century, psychologists and psychotherapists began to develop models for teaching communication skills that can strengthen interpersonal relationships. Although such programs have multiplied through the years, most of them build on the same basic concepts. Some of the “scripts” in these programs may at first seem a bit too rigid or structured, but practicing them is often the only way to break the habits we learned growing up and as members of our communities.

Effective communication requires good self-awareness. Before you speak, think about what is going on inside you and what you want to accomplish. Are you feeling angry and reactive? Are you feeling the desire to prove someone wrong and demonstrate that you are not only right, but somehow superior to the other person or persons? If that is your purpose, you probably don't need any advice about how to proceed, but you might want to reconsider your motives. Do you really want to drive people away, including those who could be your best friends and support?

Dr. Thomas Gordon began his work in the 1950s as a consultant to business organizations, and in the 1960s he developed a course for parents. He later wrote the books *Parent Effectiveness Training* and *Teacher Effectiveness Training*, making popular the terms “I” Messages, Active Listening, and No-Lose Conflict Resolution. All of the relationship education materials I have used or reviewed use similar concepts. They teach me to own my feelings and needs, instead of blaming or attacking someone else. After I name my feelings, I can describe whatever triggered them and explain the thoughts behind the feelings. “I feel upset when I see a mess in the kitchen because then I think that my efforts to keep it clean are not appreciated and that I am going to have to clean it up again.” No one can argue with such a statement, but judgmental words labeling others as thoughtless or irresponsible will likely elicit a defensive reaction.

Active Listening requires putting my own thoughts and opinions aside temporarily and rephrasing what I heard. “Are you saying that you found that mess there already and didn't want to clean up after someone else?” Empathic Listening goes even further and guesses at the feelings behind what has been stated. “You must have felt

annoyed when you found those dirty dishes in the sink.” Notice how this brings both speaker and listener together, since they are likely experiencing the same feelings. Consider how an accusation by the first speaker might have triggered a defensive and angry response. Once two persons are in agreement about the situation, they can begin to work toward a mutually satisfactory solution.

No-Lose Conflict Resolution invites both parties, once they fully understand each other’s feelings and needs, to let go of their pre-conceived solutions and freely brainstorm new ideas that might work for both. One person, or a third party, writes down the ideas; and neither party should express objections to any idea proposed. Imaginative and playful responses help, since a seemingly crazy idea can trigger something else that might actually work. After creating a list of possible solutions, both parties state which solutions they cannot accept and cross those off the list. From the remaining ideas, they chose one and make a plan for implementing it, indicating who will take what actions, when, and where. They also agree on a time when they will evaluate the effectiveness of the solution and revisit the “No-Lose” process as needed. By jointly owning both the problem and the solution, the parties increase their chances for a successful resolution and strengthen their bond as partners in the relationship.

By modeling these skills in the simple conversational exchanges of daily life and by teaching “I Messages, Active Listening, Empathic Listening, and No-Lose Conflict Resolution in church school classes, small groups, and special workshops for all ages, we can nurture mutually respectful and cooperative relationships and change the whole atmosphere of a church and community. Effective teaching of such skills requires clear explanation, skillful modeling, and opportunities for guided practice. Guided practice gives participants a chance to experience how it feels to speak and listen for connection, with gentle prompting as needed and positive feedback as often as possible. Even then, many of us may never learn to use these skills automatically in every situation. After the fact, however, we can often see how we could have communicated better and then make an attempt to repair any relationship damage we may have caused by over-reacting, attacking, making assumptions, or misunderstanding.

Use the “Communicating for Connection Worksheet” posted at this same website for teaching and practicing these skills. See also books and programs on relationship education for individuals, couples, parents, and other audiences in the “Best Practices Articles and Recommended Resources” section at www.marriagelovepower.net or search by topic or title at <http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/leadership-resources/intergenerational-family-ministries>.

Jane P. Ives, United Methodist Marriage and Family Ministries Consultant (8/21/2015)
10 Quaker Lane, Portland, ME 04103, 207-797-8930, Janepives@gmail.com
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