

Communications 101:
for Parish Catechetical Leaders

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A woman answered the knock at her door and found a destitute man. He wanted to earn money by doing odd jobs, so she asked, “Can you paint?”

“Yes,” he said, “I’m a pretty good painter.”

“Well, here’s a gallon of green paint and a brush. Go behind the house and you’ll see a porch that needs repainting. Be very careful. When you’re done, I’ll look it over and pay you what it’s worth.”

It wasn’t more than an hour before he knocked again. “All finished,” he reported with a smile.

“Did you do a good job?” she asked.

“Yes. But lady, there one thing I’d like to point out to you. That’s not a Porsche back there. That’s a Mercedes.”

Communication doesn’t always go the way we think we have planned it! Communication is at the core of so much; it can’t be left to happenstance. It is the basis of all relationships; it is the lifeblood of an organization.

There are volumes written on it; there are workshops and courses given on it. It seems a little presumptuous (and frustrating) to address it in a short article, but as the title implies (Communication 101), this is only the beginning; it is only scratching the surface.

Why?

As parish catechetical leaders, we want to communicate well for several reasons: to share information, to form relationships, to build community, and to create a sense of shared ownership.

In this Age of Information, information is power. Ministry is not about some people having the information and doling it out only when they choose to.

Relationships and communities are built when people are trusted, when people are treated as equals, when all have all the information they need and all are invited to be part of the decisions which affect them.

The only way anything will be achieved by a group – and our Church, each parish – and all the groups within the parish fit this reality -- is when there is a sense, an experience, of shared ownership. This commitment and cohesiveness is built upon many foundations, but one of the primary ones is open, honest, and frequent communication.

Who?

The answer to this question is easy: everyone and everybody. Keep all your channels of communication open. No one is unimportant. Pastor, principal, catechists, school faculty, youth minister, liturgist and music director, maintenance

staff, Education Commission, Parish Pastoral Council, Finance Commission, (arch)diocesan staff – to name just a few.

How and how often you communicate with them is determined by your parish's structures and methods. Be sure you know what is the best method of communication for each person. For instance, some pastors prefer things in writing first so they can think it over before a meeting/appointment. If frequent staff meetings are not a part of your parish procedures, ask for a regular meeting with the pastor (and the principal – and any others whenever necessary) so that everyone is always on top of things before they happen and are part of the decision-making processes.

How?

Perhaps the most important rule of thumb to remember here is that everything communicates. Just as our Catholic heritage shows us that we communicate not just with words but with symbol, music, movement, mystery, season, space, time, ritual, and tradition, everything that we do (and don't do) communicates something to our colleagues and the people to whom/with whom we minister. What does your building say? How are people welcomed when they enter any of the buildings, when they call on the phone, when they wait in the parking lot, etc.? How do you pray together; what do those prayers – and the way you pray -- communicate about what you believe about God – and one another?

Remembering that everything communicates, let's look at some specific avenues of communication which are part and parcel of the life of a parish catechetical leader (with a few suggestions for each one):

- The written word. This can take many forms: formal letters, e-mails, memos, handwritten notes, the church bulletin, the parish website, newsletters for catechists and/or families, etc.

Short, attractive, and affirming are good rules for the written word. Tastefully designed notices or brochures create the impression that the gathering - or the announcement - has some significance.

Use the written word to acknowledge and affirm people.

Share the information that is needed and of interest; people generally prefer short sentences with little or no jargon.

In today's electronic world, it has been proven that people pay more attention to emails, websites, and faxes than ground mail, so don't discount their importance. Go to where the people are.

That being said, this may sound like a contradiction. Get in the habit, too, of sending a hand-written note or card to someone who needs a thank you, an affirmation, or just a word of encouragement or acknowledgment. It takes a few minutes, but means so much to the recipient, especially in this day of impersonal and easy e-mail messages. Somehow, when someone goes to the trouble of hand writing a letter or card, actually puts a real stamp on it and writes out your name and address instead of a computer label, it can make you feel like a very significant person.

- **Public speaking.** It has been said: “The mind is a wonderful thing. It starts working the minute you’re born and never stops until you get up to speak in public.” Yet, Parish Catechetical Leaders can’t get through life without speaking in front of others.

The form that most public speaking takes for a Parish Catechetical Leader are catechist meetings, parents meetings, and/or adult faith formation sessions.

People’s time is valuable; therefore, any gathering we invite people to needs to be well-planned, well-organized and well done. Often that might mean “rehearsing” things ahead of time to be sure that everything is in place and will go smoothly. All the principles of adult learning remind us that people learn the least when they are lectured to; rather, they need to be involved in the learning process. Our gatherings, then, need to include time for interpersonal communication through small groups as well as the large group.

- **Small Group Dynamics.** The DRE often finds herself/himself working with small groups: catechists, committees, volunteer helpers, parish staff, etc. Even though at times groups might have their shortcomings (the anonymous statement: “A camel is a horse designed by a committee.”), the wisdom that often results can be inspiring. As a facilitator of a small group, draw out all members, make them feel good about being in the group, and build a sense of interdependence among them. Encourage decision-making through a four-step process of identifying the problem, analyzing it, developing and evaluating alternative solutions, and implementing the plan.

- **Conflict Resolution.** Every group will experience conflicts from time to time. They come in all sizes and shapes; some might take a skilled outside facilitator to help with the resolution. But most Parish Catechetical Leaders can manage the situation by following a few simple rules: 1) Admit that a conflict exists and get everyone to face it as soon as possible. 2) Define it. Analyze it carefully and attempt to identify the actual sources of conflict. (Often the visible issue may only be a symptom of a more deep-seated conflict.) 3) Bring the right people together. Any friction has to be resolved by those who are involved in the disharmony.
- **Listening.** This is, perhaps, the height of communication. Listening to another validates that person's experience and existence. When we are listened to, it creates us. It makes us unfold and expand. It actually takes great inner resources to be a good listener. Many times, we feel that unless we are doing the talking, no real communication is going on.

Shouldn't our parishes be the places where people know they will be listened to ... no matter what?

The Book of Sirach reminds all of us, but especially us as ministers, the necessity - and beauty - of listening: "If you love listening, you will learn. If you lend an ear, wisdom will be yours." (Sirach 6:33)

Some Concluding - But Important - Do's and Don'ts

- Communication is always two-way. We do have important information to share. Yet, do we always find ourselves informing families (or maintenance staff, etc.) or do we ask them for their input, their ideas, their needs?
- Avoid using “but.” “But” can have the effect – in the mind of the listener -- of negating whatever positive statement preceded it. Use “and” instead and watch your communications change. Avoid “you.” Use “we.” “You” can sound preachy, judgmental, or dictatorial. We are in this together.
- There is a direct link between effective communication and a high level of awareness. To focus on what we need to say and do – in light of listening to the needs of others – can be accomplished by centering ourselves through prayer. Never go into an important meeting (and which meetings aren't important?) or an appointment without first centering in quiet reflection - if even for a moment.
- Watch your language. Language is powerful. What we call something says what we think about it. Language educates and forms our thinking. What do you want your parishioners to believe about faith formation today? Think seriously about it and then use the words to accompany it. Some suggestions you might want to consider:
 - Avoid all “school” language. Catechesis is much more than an educational enterprise. Educational language keeps faith formation in the realm of memorizing facts and doctrine and while that is part of it, catechesis is about a journey that is lifelong and is

a relationship. It's about being converted to a specific way of life of discipleship.

- Avoid “attending” Mass. We celebrate liturgy. We participate in liturgy. “Attending” seems to make it a spectator sport.
 - Avoid “getting” the sacraments. We celebrate the sacraments. Sacraments are not “things” we get. They are celebrations; they are the actions of the community. They empower us to be someone, someone who lives his/her life in a different, a radical way.
 - Avoid language which indicates that sacramental preparation is “getting them ready for one special day.” It's about a whole lifetime.
 - Avoid using the word “Church” only in reference to the building. Church is predominately people.
 - Avoid “volunteers” when talking about those involved in the life of the parish. “Volunteer” often connotes something extra, something you don't have to do but decide to do to be helpful. Those involved in the life of the parish are participating because Baptism calls us to the responsibility to share in the community's life.
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- Communicate often, lots, continuously, ceaselessly, and in many and varied ways.

Some Further Resources

- Reichert, Richard (ed.). The Effective DRE: A Skills Development Series.
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1998.
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- Wicks, Robert J. Sharing Wisdom: The Practical Art of Giving and Receiving
Mentoring. New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing Co., 2000.
- <http://www.rcmp-learning.org/docs/ecdd1173.htm>
- <http://www.mindtools.com/goodpres.html>
- <http://www.communication-skills.net>
- http://discoveryhealth.queendom.com/access_communication_skills.html