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# GROWTH POINTS

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With Gary L. McIntosh, D.Min., Ph.D.

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## Communication Challenges

At first glance, it appears that communication in a church is fairly easy. A look at the communication system, however, reveals that communication is complex.

The average person in the United States receives between 4,000 and 10,000 messages per day. But, here's the crazy news. Of those messages, only about 100, or less than two percent, are remembered. Is it any wonder that people in our church don't recall announcements from the pulpit or on the church website?

Consider the following insights.

First, a church has multiple communication channels. Some people will receive information via the grapevine. Others are outside the grapevine loop, and never get the information as it's passed from person to person. They get their information from looking at posted announcements on the church's website. If the website is not updated on a regular basis, say weekly, they never receive the messages in a timely manner. Some listen

for announcements during the church's worship service. Others gain information from communication channels as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, email, texts, newsletters, pastoral visits, lay visits, phone calls, special mailings, etc. At minimum every church has thirty or more channels on which it communicates with the congregation.

Second, the grapevine is fast, but not always accurate. Someone hears something, then passes it along to another person, who in turn passes it along to still another person until numerous people have heard. In general, the larger the congregation and the more scattered the people are, the less accurate the communication that travels over it.

Third, some people will not get the message. With so many communication channels available, it's best to assume that some people in the church will not receive messages. One way communication that doesn't include the possibility of feedback, is particularly vulnerable. An announcement is sent out, but there is no way to know how many people receive the message.

Fourth, some people will receive the message but not understand it. Some messages get garbled in transmission, while others are not as clear as the originator intended them to be. This is particularly apparent when communication is

delivered by social media. Messages sent electronically are particularly prone to misinterpretation and misunderstanding.

Fifth, some people will receive the message, understand it, but not remember it. How quickly we forget. Even with the best intension, received communication is laid aside, misplaced, or forgotten in today's busy world.

Sixth, some people receive a message that was never sent. People tend to hear what they want to hear. Thus, even the clearest words are often misinterpreted by the listeners.

Seventh, silence does not mean acceptance. Even though members of the congregation may hear and understand communication correctly, it doesn't mean they agree with it. Too often the fact that people don't express disagreement is taken to mean they agree, which isn't true. Don't assume silence is agreement.

Eighth, two-way communication is better than one-way. A person-to-person phone call is better communication than a one-way text. Any communication that allows for immediate feedback is best. Thus, person-to-person communication (a luncheon meeting, for example) is better than object-to-person communication (an email, for example).

Ninth, the importance of a message is determined by the recipient. Communication

that begins with the recipient's interests, concerns, or problems in mind, is more likely to be read and understood than one that begins with the sender's concerns.

Tenth, messages communicated multiple times and in multiple ways are more likely to be effective. A good rule is to communicate all-important messages five different ways. This doesn't mean sending out a message five times by email, for example, but rather sending it on five different channels of communication.

Eleventh, different people require different channels of communication. Channels that reach people in your congregation don't normally work to reach people outside of your church (churched vs unchurched). Those that reach active members don't always reach inactive ones (churched vs dropouts). Some channels are appropriate for some messages but not for others (members vs nonmembers).

Questions:

How many channels of communication can you identify in your own church?

How many of these channels do you actually use when communicating messages to the entire congregation?

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