

Guidelines for More Effective Communication and Relationship Building in St Paul's Parish Community

Extend genuine welcome. People communicate and build relationships best in hospitable spaces. Although words of welcome are important, body language and behavior communicate acceptance far more powerfully and convincingly. (If we really are not accepting, the other person will feel it regardless of our words.)

Speak your beliefs and feelings in ways that respect other people's beliefs and feelings. It is not appropriate to interpret, correct, or debate what others say (unless participants are all in agreement that the discussion is an actual debate). Always it is appropriate to speak only for oneself, using "I" statements ("I believe"; "I think"; "I feel"; "my experience has been"; never "John and I think", "everyone knows").

"Triangulating" (reporting what another person believes, thinks, or feels to a third person, most generally done with the intent of influencing the actions of that third person) is completely unacceptable at St Paul's, unless both the second and third persons understand and agree that the first person is an authorized reporter (e.g. a canvasser), or there is a life-threatening or illegal situation (e.g. a suicide threat or abusive behavior). The Rector, Churchwardens, Vestrymen, assisting Priests, and all other parish leadership persons will always refuse to accept any anonymous communications.

No fixing, no saving, no advising, and no correcting others. It is not appropriate (1) to correct others unless one has asked for and received explicit permission ("May I share with you my understanding/experience of ...?") or (2) to criticize others unless one's own rights or responsibilities have been violated by another person and then only by sharing how the situation makes one feel and how it concretely and tangibly affects one ("When you do ___ it makes me feel ___ because ___"). It is important to learn to respond to others with honest, open questions ("appreciative inquiry").

Listen deeply. Careful, non-judgmental listening is the key to building community and to avoiding communication difficulties. Listen carefully to both the words being spoken and the equally-important unspoken feelings also being expressed. Good listening is not casual or easy and can be tiring, but it can also be one of the greatest gifts one person can give to another. (Often persons do not expect or even *want* advice in response, only to have a non-judgmental person listen openly which helps the person work out his/her own solution ... "give a man a fish, you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime".)

When the going gets rough, turn to wonder. If you feel judgmental or defensive, ask yourself, "I wonder what brought her to this belief?" "I wonder what he's feeling right now?" "I wonder what my reaction is teaching me about myself?" Although often not pleasant, many times this experience can be a valuable learning opportunity. Attend to your own inner teacher.

Trust and learn from silence. We live in a society in which many people dislike and are even afraid of silence. Every moment, many feel, must be filled with talk lest we experience "awkward" silence; and they jump to fill any open space in a conversation. In fact, silence can be a great gift that permits oneself and others to enjoy and benefit from conversation by having time to reflect and consider in a relaxed manner.

Don't blurt. Always think before speaking: “what do I really mean to say”; “is it appropriate”; “is this an effective way to express it”; “what will the other person hear when I say this this way”?

Humor is a gift. People who are brittle and take their lives and themselves too seriously (a form of self-centeredness) are not healthy and mature either spiritually or psychologically. However, there is a difference between not taking ourselves too seriously and not holding God and His creation in reverence and respect. Furthermore, unless we understand and observe the limits of the other person's sense of humor, there is the danger of crossing the line between healthy good-natured fun and hurtful derision. (Attempting to use humor when we are angry inevitably comes through as sarcasm.)

Observe confidentiality. While confidences that have been accepted (and not all have to be!) from others are always absolute (except in life-threatening or illegal situations), a good rule-of-thumb for sharing any undesigned serious information is the “need to know” (does the person with whom I am considering sharing this serious information have a significant need to know it?). Like respect, polite behavior, and fundamental honesty and authenticity, the ability to keep confidences is an indispensable part of building relationships.

Assertiveness not aggressiveness. Assertiveness is getting ones wants and needs met in a way that takes into consideration the wants and needs of others (“win-win”). Aggressiveness is getting ones wants and needs met with no concern for and regardless of the cost to the wants and needs of others (“win-lose”). While the Christian Faith never calls us to passivity (being a “doormat”), it does call us to assertiveness rather than aggressiveness.

Just for the record:

Harassment and abusive behavior are illegal. In addition to being unacceptable in the Christian community, harassment and abuse, both physical and emotional, are serious legally-actionable offenses for which St Paul's has a publicly stated zero tolerance policy. (Repeated instances have resulted and will result in the person being removed from the church buildings by the Rector and being forbidden to come onto parish property again on pain of arrest.)

While every member of a community should have the right to express his/her honest feelings and concerns in an appropriate and respectful way, personal attacks, slurs, hostile sarcasm, and malicious gossip are never acceptable in the Christian Church and St Paul's Parish.