



Godly Communication

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." John 1.1

Authors give a lot of thought to the start of a book, and John was no exception. John starts by telling us that communication is inseparable from God's character.

The Bible shows us God communicating in a variety of different ways:

- From the beginning, God's actions and God's words have often been inseparable. "And God said, 'Let there be light', and there was light." Genesis 1.3
- "The Word became flesh". John 1.14
- God speaks by his Spirit to his people directly. God also speaks through scripture, prophets, visions, dreams, angels, the events of history and even tablets of stone.
- God actively encourages his people to speak to him, and promises to listen to our prayers.

Communication is integral to God's being, God's mission and God's strategy, and these realities are to shape the culture of our whole diocese. Without it, leaders can't empower, structures are ineffective and it's difficult to form loving relationships.

Good and Poor Communication

Good communication provides transparency and openness; poor communication can create misunderstanding and mistrust.

Good communication helps people feel they belong; poor communication can alienate them.

Good communication demonstrates we value people; poor communication can suggest we don't care.

Good communication is participative; poor communication can be disempowering and even oppressive.

Good communication can promote reconciliation; poor communication can deepen divisions.

Most people acknowledge the need for good communication, but:

- It rarely occurs naturally or automatically;
- It requires careful thought and planning;
- It is costly, especially regarding the time it consumes.

Unfortunately, it's busy people who often need to communicate the most, and yet busy people have the least time to do it well.

This paper describes the communication culture that we seek to develop throughout the whole diocese. It is a culture that better reflects the character of the God we worship and serve.

God's Mission in Word and Action

*"All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation."
2 Corinthians 5:18*

God's mission (missio Dei) is God's self-communication and action in the world. This is what we are invited to participate in; hence the pithy summary of mission paraphrased by Rowan Williams – "finding out what God is doing and joining in".

God's communication of himself to us is:

- **Multimedia** – it comes in many and various ways;
- **Intentional** – an integral part of God's plan or strategy;
- **Relational** – responsive, inviting participation;
- **Trustworthy** – what was mysterious and hidden is now open;
- **Caring** – respecting the dignity of others.

This describes the culture that we are seeking to develop across the whole diocese.

Multimedia

*"In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways,
but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son" (Hebrews 1:1-2)*

Communication methods have changed, are changing and will continue to change. The whole diocese cannot allow itself to become disconnected from large sections of society.

God is not restricted to a single channel of communication. From commandments engraved on tablets of stone to angels appearing to shepherds, God communicates in a rich variety of ways.

We each have our own communication preferences, whether it is the printed word, email or social media; however, effective communication prioritises the preferences of those we are trying to reach.

For younger people, digital media (which includes social media) is both the present and the future.

Intentional

Communication is an essential part of strategic planning, and it needs to be considered from the very beginning.

God didn't devise a plan to save the world and then consider how best to communicate it; instead, communication was an integral part of that plan. It was God's plan to send the prophets then his Son through the Holy Spirit to spread the word. Central to the plan was the writing of scripture, and God intends that we too play our part in sharing the good news that scripture tells. In that sense, we can even say that communication was the plan.

Unfortunately, it's all too easy to make a plan and then (as an afterthought) think about how best to communicate it. There are two drawbacks to this approach:

- First, by the time that a plan is finalised, there is usually insufficient time to communicate well;
- Second, last-minute communication often upsets people who ought to have been notified earlier.

The best approach is to start thinking about effective communication right from the outset.

Relational

Communication is a two-way process, and we need to be effective listeners. We worship a God who actively encourages us to speak to him, and who welcomes our prayers.

People need to feel confident that their comments, ideas and suggestions are both welcome and valued. Furthermore, if an issue arises, they need reassurance that they are contacting the most appropriate person.

Trustworthy

There are many passages of our trustworthy scriptures that contrast darkness and light, and we are called to be a people who walk in the light. We seek to communicate clearly and, wherever possible, to be as transparent and open as possible.

There is a natural desire to hide the things of which we are ashamed and no-one enjoys washing their dirty linen in public. Sometimes this is privately expressed as “wanting to protect our reputation”. However, the greatest reputational risk for an organisation is that people no longer trust its leaders and its institutional systems. And more importantly, we are followers of Jesus who always showed greater concern for justice and truth than for his own reputation.

More commonly, a lack of transparency and openness is not a deliberate attempt to keep things hidden; rather, it is simply due to forgetfulness and insufficient planning. This in turn is often an unintentional consequence of the busy environments in which we live and work.

Caring

The welfare of children, young people and vulnerable adults is paramount. Therefore, all safeguarding allegations or concerns must be reported to the Diocesan Safeguarding Adviser and, where appropriate, to the statutory authorities.

In other contexts, the issue of confidentiality can be more complex. Although we seek to be as transparent and open as possible, there are good and legitimate reasons why some information ought to be kept confidential.

When dealing with sensitive matters, key stakeholders will rightly expect to be informed before news is shared more widely. This often requires both time and careful planning, and significant hurt can be caused if information is leaked prematurely.

When dealing with personal information, careful consideration needs to be given as to the reasons why it might need to be shared. Such information is often precious to its owner, and the Bible has harsh words for those who share it carelessly:

“A gossip betrays a confidence; so avoid anyone who talks too much.” Proverbs 20:19

St Paul puts it even more strongly, and lists “gossips” amongst those who have “no understanding, no fidelity, no love and no mercy.” Romans 1:28-32

Thus we need to respect the dignity of others, and to think carefully about our motives for sharing any sensitive or personal information.

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The Bishop of Coventry says:

Good communication is vital for our journey together as a whole diocese. So I commend this paper for discussion in churches, schools, chaplaincies, cathedral, synods, boards, committees and diocesan offices.

This is a working document that Graeme Pringle will update from time-to-time. Any comments or suggested amendments should be sent to graeme.pringle@covcofe.org

The call to ‘godly communication’ is a high aspiration and we all fall short. But, is there one step that your organisation could take in this direction?

As ever, in Christ, the living Word,
+Christopher