

# THE PARISH PAPER

## IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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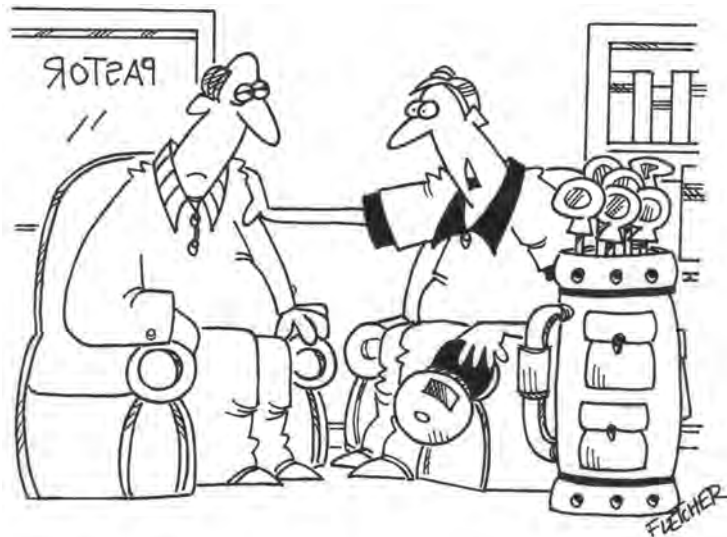
### Important Conversations: How to Avoid the Sand Traps

Churchgoers and clergy—even those with excellent listening skills—sometimes drift off the fairway of an important conversational round, whether they are handling personal matters with friends or church matters with members. They can avoid these sand traps through increased awareness of the ways they fall into them. Here are few conversational tips.

- *Avoid thinking about something else while the other person is talking.* You show others that you are listening with your eyes and body language. People who read you as distracted decide that you are not interested in them.
- *Avoid sharing your own problems.* Your instinct may tell you that this personal sharing strengthens rapport with the person. However, this changes the conversational focus from his or her need to your need.
- *Avoid thinking that you must fill every silence.* Waiting five seconds for people to continue their thoughts gives many people the courage to say what they would not otherwise have shared.
- *Avoid scolding and shaming.* Example: “Oh, cheer up! You shouldn’t be talking that way!” Such statements stifle further productive conversation.
- *Avoid threatening, ordering, or advising.* Examples include “If you don’t, then . . .,” “You have to . . .,” and “You ought to . . .” These seldom connect with a person’s inclination to alter behaviors.
- *Avoid moralizing and preaching.* Using statements that ridicule, blame, or criticize are not helpful. Rather than motivating people to change their thinking, those words usually increase their resistance to change.
- *Avoid arguing.* You move few people in a positive direction by arguing. You make more progress by saying, “I understand how you feel, but my feelings are different.” Then, do *not* add reasons for *why* you feel that way. If they try to keep arguing, just repeat exactly what you said before. Then change the subject. Occasionally, you might have

to say it a third time. But twice usually extinguishes the person’s attempt to argue.

- *Avoid trying to look as if you know everything.* “I don’t know” is the right answer to some questions.
- *Avoid platitudes* such as “God helps those who help themselves.” Platitudes communicate a lack of understanding that your friend’s problem is unique.
- *Avoid praising as a substitute for listening.* Saying “You are doing great! Stop worrying.” often blocks people from talking about something they wanted to discuss.
- *Avoid giving reassurance not based on facts.* When you tell someone, “I’m sure he will be okay,” your opinion is based on insufficient knowledge. Thus, most people think your optimism is phony.
- *Avoid diverting and withdrawal statements.* Example: “Let’s talk about more pleasant things.”
- *Avoid playing psychiatrist.* Statements like “Is that because of your mother’s harsh treatment of you when you were growing up?” often sidetrack conversations. If a friend comes across as having an emotional disorder, encourage him or



“NOW...TAKE YOUR TIME AND TELL ME  
WHAT'S ON YOUR MIND.”

her to discuss the matter with a counselor or a physician.

- *Avoid violating confidences.* Exceptions include suicidal feelings, child abuse, or spousal abuse. Report these to appropriate authorities or family members.

### **When You're in the Rough: Unavoidable Situations**

When conversations involve expressions of raw emotions—grief, anger, or frustration—even more skillful responses are required.

- *What if the person cries?* Say, “That is very painful. There is nothing wrong with crying.” Sit quietly and wait for them to finish crying.
- *What if the person is angry?* Say, “Joe, it sounds like you have strong feelings about that. Let’s sit down and talk about it.” (People find it harder to stay angry while sitting down than when standing up.) “Tell me a little more about this.” Avoid making defensive statements about yourself, your church, or other staff members! Listen uncritically.
- *What if, after you hear Joe’s story, he still seems angry at something?* Say, “You seem like a person of real integrity, so there must be a good reason why you feel so angry about that. Tell me a little more about why you feel that way.”
- *What if Joe seems angry with someone in the congregation?* Say, “Joe, I feel like someone in our church has made a real blunder. Perhaps I was that person.” This is called introducing an intentional inaccuracy into the conversation. After you say that, Joe usually feels that he has no choice but to tell you that *it is not you*. He cannot set you straight without telling you the truth. Approximately 99 percent of people respond with their real feelings.
- *What about that 1 percent who still withhold their feelings?* Say, “Joe, I know you may not want to tell me, but I would really like to know. But if you would rather not discuss it, that’s okay.” This is called giving permission.
- *What if the person seems overwhelmed by grief, such as with the recent death of a spouse?* Say, “You feel a great sense of loss right now, and it is hard for you to find the energy to take care of yourself.” Then listen to how they feel. Do not tell them *not to think about it*. Expressing feelings of grief often helps people get through the process. Grief comes in waves; people can have similar feelings weeks, or even months, later.

### **No Mulligans: More-Serious Conversations**

People often seek out pastors and church leaders for help in critical situations that involve suicidal thoughts, spousal abuse, or child neglect or abuse. Pastors and others need to educate themselves about counseling techniques, legal requirements about reporting situations, and community resources that help people in these situations (such as hospitals, child protective services, and abuse centers).

Building a network of counselors, psychologists, psychiatrists, and others with expert training is also excellent preparation for when someone seeks your counsel.

- *What if the person says that he or she is considering suicide?* If someone says, “I feel like ending it all!” *always* take that sentence seriously. Say, “It sounds like you are feeling pretty hopeless about your situation. Tell me a little more about that.” Encourage them to begin seeing a professional counselor by saying, “I would like you to talk with someone who is much more of an expert in this than I am.” Describe that helping professional and his or her expertise. After your conversation, consider whether you should notify a family member, their physician, or someone else.
- *What if someone describes spousal abuse?* Ask, “Have you talked with the police about that?” For example, you might point out: “Husbands who beat their wives seldom stop doing it until they hit a brick wall. In other words, they keep doing it until doing it becomes painful *to them*, which seldom happens until the authorities are involved. You have two choices. You can keep on letting this happen or you can stop it.” Let them know that there are safe places they can go and, if the person is willing, help them formulate a plan.
- *What if the person reports child abuse?* Most states require that you notify the police or authorities. Follow the protocol of your organization in conjunction with the laws of your state.

### **The Golden Rule in Conversation**

Silence is not always golden. Coupled with listening, a few well-chosen words can make a golden difference in someone’s life.