

# Effective Communication: A Guide for Congregations

## Congregation Telephone Ministries - Incoming and Outgoing

### Internal telephone ministry

Who answers the phone? How?

Should there be an answering machine or a voice mail system? What kind of message?

How are messages passed to appropriate people for action?

Do you need to add a TDD (telephone device for the deaf)?

Does your staff need to carry cell phones?

How many fax and computer lines do you need in order to be efficient yet keep at least one incoming line available at all times?

### Receiving telephone calls

Have paper, pen and church directory at hand (or computer turned on and appropriate software opened)

Smile when you answer "Good morning," "Good afternoon" or "This is St. Lucy's Church" and give your name. You will sound brighter. Standing also makes your voice brighter.

Let the caller state her/his business first, taking notes as the call progresses.

Ask for the full name of the person calling and how to contact her/him.

Most calls are to get or give information. Try to respond positively to the person calling.

If you cannot provide the needed information and feel someone else can, offer to try to get it or pass along the request to the appropriate person.

Before hanging up, review commitments. Ask the caller to confirm any instructions you have given her/him, and restate the actions you promise to take as a result of the call.

Follow through with any promises made.

### Using an answering machine

Use an answering machine only when the congregation's office is not staffed.

Have the announcement written out, familiarize yourself with the process of recording and practice the message aloud.

Stand while recording.

Speak with a warm, friendly voice.

Provide concise, accurate information (include times of worship services and how to reach the pastor in case of an emergency).

Set machine to answer within about four rings if possible.

Be faithful in checking and returning or forwarding all messages left on the machine in a timely manner.

Review the outgoing message weekly to be sure it is current and reflects any special events.

Include: congregation's name, location, mission/vision statement or tag line, fax number and/or instructions for sending a fax on this machine, Web address and times for worship

Be sure to change the message when special events are over or anything else important changes.

### Voice mail systems

Use a voice mail system only when the congregation's office is not staffed.

Make your opening greeting warm and inviting, just as you did your answering machine message, including worship times, etc.

If you must occasionally use the voice mail system while the office is staffed, make the first option "To speak with a church staff member, dial XX now." Other general options ought to follow that, and only later such specific options as the telephone directory. Callers to an unfamiliar voice mail system frequently choose options early in the list, and if the more general option is listed later, it might be missed.

### Telephone tree

The telephone tree is a proven tool for communicating within the congregation quickly. Have one person start the tree by calling major branch leaders (your congregational council or deacons committee). They in turn will each call five or so predetermined people, who will each call five more. That way you can reach almost all the families in the congregation within 24 hours. Keep each person's call list up to date, and offer training for callers (a printed piece they can keep with their call list).

Caller qualifications

- Pleasant phone personality and time to make calls
- Ability to call anyone without excessive anxiety and be comfortable on the phone -- often older people and physically challenged people are good callers
- Ability to understand the task and message to be conveyed

- General familiarity with the "state of the church" and its leadership
- Reliability; able to convey a message clearly, to avoid editorial comment and to report back promptly and accurately
- Interest in the mission and programs of the church

#### **Training tips for telephone tree callers:**

- Make the message simple and concrete. Explain carefully and fill in points with short, concise sentences.
- Let the caller prepare her/his own format, but make sure she/he takes notes.
- Keep the call brief. Chatty, rambling callers are not helpful; the message gets lost in the words and the listener gets impatient.
- Do it now. Speed is the great benefit for the telephone network.
- Be prepared. If leaving a message on an answering machine or voice mail, leave a clear, concise message that includes the caller's name and number to call for more information or clarification.
- Follow through. Callers should try three times to reach a person: morning, midday and evening. If no one answers within 48 hours, call the people on that person's list; otherwise the chain is broken.
- If a caller hears of a personal problem or an organizational concern while talking with a member of the congregation, that information should be conveyed to the leader of the network so it gets to the right ministerial or lay leader.
- Broken links should also be reported.
- Be considerate. Don't kill your telephone tree by excessive use. Except for emergencies, try not to use it more than once a month.

#### **Care calls**

Most congregations have members living alone who are elderly or physically challenged, and who appreciate someone from the church calling once or twice a day to make sure no emergency has placed them in a life-threatening situation. The calls are short in order not to tire the person, but long enough to convey support and interest. If the telephone is not answered, the person making the care call also makes sure someone goes to the home to find out what the situation is.

#### **Outreach telephone ministry**

- Is the telephone used in outreach ministry?
- How often?
- Who does it?
- What is the message?

#### **Dial-a-Prayer**

This ministry can be popular with people who are lonely, both members of the congregation and people in the community. When a person calls the Dial-a-Prayer number they hear a prerecorded message. The message needs to be brief (two to three minutes), filled with images and narrated with a pleasing voice. It can be a story, several Bible verses, a poem with a closing blessing and/or a one-sentence prayer, but it needs to change fairly frequently - daily if possible. It requires a dedicated extra telephone line, along with an answering machine. A large percentage of Dial-a-prayer ministries have been financed by memorial gifts.

Consider how you will advertise this special ministry and phone number in your community.

#### **Reach new members**

Every community provides some way for congregations to find out about new members - whether through the utility company, a "welcome wagon" service or a criss-cross directory in the library or the local Chamber of Commerce. A brief, friendly, phone call can be a welcoming first contact for new residents in your community. Offer them information about your congregation; if they are interested, it may be possible to link them with a member in their neighborhood. If they are of another faith, offer to refer them to that local church.

This ministry, along with others specifically aimed at new members of the community, can be an organized ecumenical effort, with all the churches participating together and referring new families who already have religious ties.

#### **Other ideas**

Make it your congregation's mission to help people who cannot afford phones: Install a telephone for local calls and make it available to the community. The phone company can set up the account to block long distance calls.

Help families in need pay back telephone bills and thus qualify for LinkUp or Lifeline benefits

Provide a place for people looking for work to make and receive phone calls related to job interviews, including someone to take messages.

Call all your members when there is a change in worship or Sunday school times or locations. Use the phone to call people to remind them that it's Sunday and worship will start shortly

Telephone "prayer chain"?

