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## The No-No's of Parking Lot Conversations

by Rev. Jane Anderson

How often have you walked out of church to your car only to be stopped by another member wanting to engage you in a conversation about what just transpired at the meeting you just attended? Or, how often have you left worship, only to overhear the chit chat in the parking lot about the pastor's sermon? Or how often have you participated in a conversation in the parking lot that began, "Did you hear what happened to Joe?" Or, "Did you hear what Mary said?" We've all been privy to, or joined in, such conversations.



I believe that the intent of such conversations comes from a place within all of us that cares. Many of us care deeply about our church family, want to be involved in what's happening in our church life, and are committed to improving our spiritual lives. That church meeting may have spurred great ideas that we want to continue to talk about on our way out of church. We may have received news of someone in our community who's hurting and may want to talk about how we can help. We may have been inspired and challenged by our pastor's sermon and want to process it with someone else who was in worship. Yet, I also know that such parking lot conversations, and many others like them, can turn negative quickly. The conversation in the parking lot does not allow other committee members to participate in the conversation, adding their own ideas or responses. The parking lot sermon talk that never gets to the pastor, doesn't allow his or her voice to be a part of the conversation. And we all know from that elementary game of *Telephone* that what is originally said and what is finally heard are often two very different things. And, how often do our genuine concerns and desire for care include the one who is in need. Isn't the respectful response to ask the person what they need or how we might be helpful? Parking lot conversations can be helpful or they can be the source of great consternation, distress and even a source of real harm for our church family, the body of Christ. I have seen the long-term effects of such communication patterns within our churches and it's not pretty—divisiveness and division, derision and disdain—long-term debilitation, if not permanent damage to the body of Christ.

Ephesians 4 says that we are to build up the body of Christ. *“Speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love.”* If, friends, this is our plumb line, then we must pause and ask ourselves, are our parking lot conversations, however well-intended, building up the Body of Christ?

The next time we are privy to such parking lot talk we might pause and ask ourselves the following questions:

- Who benefits from this conversation?
- Who is being cared for here? Is the one who is in need of care included in the conversation?
- Who is included and who is excluded from this conversation? It may be that the conversation needs to be tabled to a time when those who need to be included can join the conversation.
- Is this the right and respectful place for this conversation?
- Does this conversation demonstrate God’s love and grace? Does this conversation help promote God’s greatest desire for the common good of the whole community?

I recognize we may not be able to give perfect pause for such reflection in the moment. But, choosing to practice putting the parking lot conversations on pause on a regular basis and asking such questions of ourselves and others can help transform our church communities and build healthy communication patterns which will serve us well and help build up the Body of Christ.

Blessings and Peace,

Rev. Jane B. Anderson