

In praise of gossip

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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I used to get a phone call every Monday morning. “I just wanted to let you know what’s being said,” the caller would begin, and my body would tense as if preparing to be punched. Then, I would get the rundown of every complaint that people had about me. At first, my curiosity welcomed these reports. (*What are people saying about me? Is there something I can do that will make me a better pastor?*) Then the reports started doing real damage to my soul, and eventually my body. I tried to stop her, but she believed that she was sincerely trying to help me.

Over the years, I have heard everything from how my husband’s shirt wasn’t ironed to how I lived in the wrong neighborhood. I was usually on the wrong side of political issues and no one liked my clothes. I was neglecting my household duties as a wife with my traveling. Since my husband is a pastor, I would be the subject of gossip in both churches.

Tidbits were shared around in the women’s circles and over the men’s lunch. I never took it very well. I don’t take criticism well in general (that’s one of many character flaws), and I began to think about all of the passages in Scripture:

*Like an arrow stuck in a person’s thigh, so is gossip inside a fool.*

*Curse the gossips and the double-tongued, for they destroy the peace of many.*

*They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious towards parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.*

*If any thinks they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless.*

*No one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison.*

I understood the sentiments of the words. I felt the poison. I could recite the verses from memory. As the years went on, I hated being the subject of gossip.

It was much later when I found out the importance of it. I was working with a woman who had a sexual predator for a pastor. She had been dodging unwelcome advances, so she went to the church elders and complained. It was a conservative congregation, run by male elders, and they didn't believe her.

"So what did you do?" I asked.

"I called up every person I knew and told them what had happened," she answered. Through their robust network of gossip, she found other victims. They kept talking until the man was eventually marked and left the church.

Since that day, I became much more aware of the ways in which churches and other organizations adapt. ([Ron Heifetz](#) is the go-to guy on that.) Churches are amazingly resilient, and if a group of people is not being heard, then they will respond in odd ways. Like an ingrown hair that's infected with puss, because it cannot rise up from the skin properly, they will make it uncomfortable for everyone involved. The reason for the gossip might be because an authoritarian pastor doesn't allow dissent. Or a church is trying to hide addictive behavior, so the organization might respond with an active gossip network.

So what do you do if you're the subject of the nastiness? I try to always find out names and details so that I can deal with it directly.

I laugh about it if it's something small. ("I hear you hate my haircut! You'll have to pay for me to get a better cut next time! I'm always up for a spa day!")

If it's something big, I also deal with it directly, and sometimes with a third party.

When you deal with gossip directly, it often stops, because you're inviting open communication when it was once closed. And people get embarrassed.

But there are times when a church is dealing with a historic wound and the trust has been eroded so much that no matter what you do, the gossip will keep going. That's when you just have to look at yourself in the mirror and say to yourself, "It's not about me." Then you have to repeat it. Because as important as gossip is for adapting, the poison still hurts.