

Church Gossip: Prophecy or Profanity
How is one's faith and/or ministry affected by church gossip?

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Certificate of Ethical Acceptability for Research Involving Humans

This is to certify that the Research Ethics Board has examined the research proposal:

AST REB File number:	0012013
Title of Research Project:	Prophecy or Profanity: The Effects of Church Gossip
Faculty Supervisor:	Dr. Susan Willhauck
Student Investigator	Rachel Campbell

and concludes that in all respects the proposed project meets appropriate standards of ethical acceptability and is in accordance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans (TCPS 2) and Atlantic School of Theology's relevant policies.

Approval Period: 1 November 2013 to 25 March 2014

On behalf of Atlantic School of Theology's Research Ethics Board, I wish you success in your research.

Dr. Alyda Faber

Chair, Research Ethics Board, Atlantic
School of Theology

Title: Church Gossip: Prophecy or Profanity
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Abstract

The following paper will explore how church gossip can affect one's faith and/or ministry in the Christian church. In *Church Gossip: Prophecy or Profanity?*, Rachel Campbell interviews seven Christians from various denominations, from four provinces in Canada, to look deeper into the topic of gossip within the Christian church community and the potential risks and benefits. Through literature reviews, theological analysis, and the information given by participants, this paper will reveal how church gossip can be both prophecy and profanity. One of the key findings of this qualitative research project focuses on the intent of the person sharing the information as one of the key indicators of whether church gossip was meant to be harmful or helpful.

Introduction

I was about five years old when my grandfather passed away. I remember a long parade of people from our church and community traveling up our red dirt road. They wore subdued colours, the kind of clothes they saved for Sunday mornings, and they came bearing Tupperware - endless Tupperware dishes in all shapes and sizes, each identified by a name scrawled on masking tape with black marker pen. Word had travelled through the area that there was an upheaval within our community, the loss of a family member, and friends and neighbours responded in that lovely, true to PEI fashion: with food.

In that instance, the gossip was not fueled by anything but good intent: the sharing of sad news to muster community support. But gossip can be a tool or a weapon. A few years later I was told that my brother was diagnosed with HIV. In 1988 there was a veil of fear around HIV in our society, driven by ignorance and even hatred. As a 12 year old, I feared that the word would get out that my brother had HIV. I feared for my

brother. I wanted to protect him from cruel chatter and to be honest I wanted to protect me, too. The likelihood of gossip being malicious was real, driven by fear of the unknown.

In both these instances, information travelled the same way - shared from one person to another. It was the net effect that differed. What was discussed, and the tone and tenor by which it was relayed, created a question: Is Gossip Prophecy or Profanity?

“Gossip” can be a noun, a verb - even an adjective. For the purposes of this paper, we shall define “gossip” as information about an individual that is passed from person to person without independent verification, and often laden with a specific ideology, viewpoint, or agenda. Therefore, gossip is the transference of information that is not necessarily factual. The Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary defines gossip as: “archaic, a godparent, a friend; crony, an idle tattler; a newsmonger, a gossip tattle; groundless rumor; also, chatter, to act as gossip; to spread gossip.”¹ Usually the gossip is not shared directly with the people to whom it pertains – at least not initially. For the purposes of this paper “church gossip” is gossip within the context of the Christian church community.

Malicious gossip can do great harm and some people consider gossip to always be bad. On the other hand, good gossip or positive gossip can be quite helpful. But in either case, there is certainly a broad taste for it. Spiteful gossip can hurt people emotionally and psychologically. It can spread untruths. It can tear a community apart. On the other hand gossip can be a means of sharing important information so that pastoral care can be offered. Author and humorist Nils Ling says, “In a small community, gossip is negotiable

¹ *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary*, s.v., “Gossip”.

currency. It can be exchanged for tea and biscuits, social standing, and minutes in the spotlight."² Oral communication has played a key role in the transference of Christian teachings from the very beginning. Within the Christian tradition, the oral sharing of the Good News was the historical method of receiving scripture and receiving the law. From mouth to ear to mouth to the next ear, word travelled. This network of communication created what was, in many respects, an information highway that carried the earliest stories of the Christian faith.

Many of the parables share a common tag line, "Let anyone with ears listen." And with those words, the Christian community drew closer. The technique of sharing information with one another through word of mouth was honed and crafted over time. It became a widely accepted way to pass information. It became "how word gets out."

This could explain why I found so many who brush off church gossip as something that has always been done, merely another form of communication, a form of entertainment. They feel it cannot be changed. But what do we really know about gossip? What happens with this well practiced technique of communication when it becomes malicious and malignant? How are we to respond to the good and bad uses of gossip in our church community? Does gossip have a function within the structure of today's church?

The following qualitative research paper will explore these and other questions about church gossip. I will examine how this social communication phenomenon may affect one's relationship with the church structure, Christian church community, and indeed one's own faith. The participants who took part in this study shared their views

² Nils Ling (author and humorist) in discussion with the author, February 2014.

on the function of church gossip, how they have encountered it, and what advice they offer when we experience the good, bad, and ugly of church gossip. I will address the purpose of the study and my research question; provide a review of the literature on church gossip; examine the biblical and theological framework of my study; describe the methodology, the data collection and analysis; and then provide conclusions.

Purpose and Research Questions

“How is one’s faith and/or ministry affected by church gossip?”

The goals of this project were to explore the potential benefits and potential risks of gossip with the Christian church community. It will examine how gossip within the church community could impact the overall spiritual health of congregants. I will explore possible impacts on ministry personnel, and how it might affect the entire church structure.

Effective communication between members of any group in society is wonderful when it serves the common good. If the mode of communication is effective, but malicious, in the end we have only succeeded in creating an effective way to hurt another person. On the other hand, if the communication relays good news to build up another person within a community, the potential benefits are quite high.

This study will attempt to dig more deeply to make some sort of sense concerning church gossip by interviewing seven participants who have experienced church gossip. I developed eight open-ended main questions to explore the potential benefits and potential risks through the use of first hand narratives. (An open-ended question is one designed to elicit expanded response; it is a question which is difficult to answer with a simple “yes” or “no”.)

The questions included:

- What is your personal understanding of gossip and how do you feel about gossip in the church?
- In your opinion why does church gossip happen within the church?
- Tell me about a time when gossip in the church has affected your faith and how did this define who you are as a Christian?
- What was it like for you when you encountered gossip within the church?
- How has gossip been handled in your church and in what ways would you suggest that gossip could be handled in the church?
- Give me an example of when gossip would be useful in the church and when gossip was harmful in the church?
- In your opinion did church gossip reflect the ministry leadership of your church, and if so, how?
- Have you ever partaken in church gossip and if so tell me more about that?

The goal was to uncover common categories and themes when dealing with church gossip in order to help us respond as a Christian community.

Review of Literature

In this section of the paper I will examine what has been written about the topic of gossip in association with the context of the Christian church environment, as well as its place in social communication. The idea is to get reader thinking about church gossip from all angles, and to better understand the nature of its context, how it has functioned in the past, and how it currently functions in our world. The hope is that this focused review of the literature will encourage readers to discover other writers on the topic of gossip, in order to know more about what we are dealing with when the subject comes up within our churches.

The effects of gossip on one's faith and/or ministry to date, has been the topic of discussion from many perspectives:

- the violence factor of gossip;
- why people participate in gossip;
- the denial that church gossip exists;
- the power component of gossip;
- why it is important to study gossip;
- how gossip can result in false accusations;
- and the gender analysis factor.

Some of the significant discoveries as stated in Clinton and Langberg are that gossip can be cloaked as a “concern” or a “prayer request.” They further point out that it is vital that you become aware and use great discernment in these situations to determine whether the information is truly a prayer request or merely gossip.³ This is echoed by Arbuckle, who feels that gossip is an expression of a response to a narcissistic need for power over others; it is in the act of gossip that a safe form of power manipulation is created.⁴

The idea that gossip can be intentionally used as a manipulation tactic is significant in dealing with such acts within the structure of the church. Farley would argue that from her study of 128 people, high frequency social secular gossipers were perceived as less powerful and liked less than low frequency gossipers. Plus, the more negative a high frequency gossipers became the less likable and powerful they were viewed. She found that high frequency gossipers still tended to have lots of friends. She

³ Dr. Tim Clinton and Dr. Diane Langberg. *The Quick-Reference Guide to Counseling Women*. (Baker Publishing Group, 2011), 157.

⁴ Gerald A. Arbuckle. *Violence, Society, and the Church: A Cultural Approach*. (Liturgical Press, 2004), 77.

speculated that perhaps high frequency gossipers are welcomed into social networks for fear of others losing the opportunity to learn information, but are kept at arm's length.⁵

In this viewpoint, one seems to be on a slippery slope of social acceptability when it comes to partaking in or spreading gossip. Capps goes further, arguing that social scientific research and literary studies on gossip present a more complicated view of this form of human interaction. He compared the similarities of the structure of gossip with those of the Gospel's stories by allowing the listener to enter the lives of another through imagination. Information shared in the storytelling format could also be viewed as gossip.⁶

For their part, Szekfü and Szvetelszky states that gossip is a mixture of special stories and opinions, concerning the story, and it has a special role spreading opinions around; political preference, urban legends, and even what products to purchase. Instead of being the story, it is the transference of one's opinions about the story that is the hallmark of true gossip.⁷ Crockett says that most people have good intentions to not partake in gossip, but lack the wisdom and the understanding to resist talking about everything they know. This lack of wisdom can create hurt to those on the receiving end of the gossip, as well as those who partake.⁸

⁵Sally D. Farley. "Is gossip power? The inverse relationships between gossip, power, and likability." *European Journal Of Social Psychology* 41, no. 5 (August 2011): 574-579.

⁶ Donald Capps. "Gossip, Humor, and the Art of Becoming an Intimate of Jesus." *Journal Of Religion & Health* 51, no. 1 (March 2012): 99-117.

⁷ Balázs Szekfü and Zsuzsanna Szvetelszky. "Three Degrees of Inclusion: the Gossip-Effect in Human Networks." *AIP Conference Proceedings* 776, no. 1 (June 21, 2005): 308-313.

⁸ Martha L. Crockett. *Gossip*. (Author House, 2004), 22.

In looking at theories that scholars have put forward about gossip, Blodgett states that there are three things that most researchers who have studied gossip say about it: 1) gossip is difficult to define, 2) the subject of gossip is understudied, and 3) by its very nature, gossip is difficult to study (this difficulty is also reflected in its reliability). Gossip is hard to define because in many respects some may not consider their sharing of information as “gossip”. Instead it can be seen as a socially acceptable form of communication.⁹

All these works look at gossip in different ways, through different filters; as a result their written works result in different perspectives, but all aid in the initial attempts to dig deeper into the effects of gossip on one's faith and/or ministry. Blodgett describes the difficulty of undertaking such a research topic, pointing out that some pastoral theologians considered the community function of gossip as social bonding, moral evaluation, and education. This, however, does not address how gossip builds trust in such communities and the negative effects of this form of communication.¹⁰

Friedman discusses the concept of emotional triangles in congregational systems, identifying them as similar to those seen within families. The connections within a congregational system establish a relationship model that can be used to understand the role of each person within the congregational family and how their roles function.¹¹ Gilbert applies the Bowen Theory around the nature of triangles within organizations or congregations to discuss the values of good leadership. The more defined the leader is as a person, the better his or her chances of staying emotionally neutral and looking at other,

⁹ Barbara J. Blodgett. *Lives Entrusted: An Ethic of Trust for Ministry*. (Fortress Press, 2008), 98.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Edwin H. Friedman. *Generation to Generation*. (The Guilford Press, 1985), 212.

more effective ways to communicate without using the triangle form of communication. This allows for logical thinking and better results in solving conflict.¹²

Hartung and Renner used an online questionnaire study to look at social behaviours in the areas of gossip and social curiosity. An English and German language sample were asked questions that focused on social curiosity, gossip, epistemic curiosity inventory, curiosity and exploration inventory, personality traits, and lay conceptions of curiosity and gossip. A total of 370 participants were involved between the ages of 16 and 77 with 69% being women. The study found that gossip behaviour appears to be more driven by desire for entertainment and social curiosity by general gathering of information on how people feel, think and the need to belong.¹³

Farley explored the relationship between gossip, power, and likeability. Participants completed one questionnaire to assess perceived liking and power of the target individual (a person they felt had those attributes) and then to rate themselves. All participants were told that the study was about informal communication. The results showed that those who gossiped positively were more likable than those who gossiped negatively.¹⁴

Szekfü and Szvetelszky explored the different degrees of friendship and how that relates to the transmission of gossip. In their questionnaires they showed that what information you would share depended on the degree of familiarity you might have with

¹² Roberta M. Gilbert. *The Eight Concepts of the Bowen Theory*. (Leading Systems Press, 2004), 54.

¹³ Freda-Marie Hartung and Britta Renner. "Social Curiosity and Gossip: Related but Different Drives of Social Functioning." *Plos ONE* 8, no. 7 (July 2013): 1-9.

¹⁴ Sally D. Farley. "Is gossip power? The inverse relationships between gossip, power, and likability." *European Journal Of Social Psychology* 41, no. 5 (August 2011): 574-579.

that person. A model was constructed where degrees of friendship, trust, and intimacy were assigned, with higher numbers reflecting a more remote relationship. It was discovered the information was not shared if the person didn't feel a connection, familiarity, or relationship.¹⁵

Arbuckle concentrated on the tactics of gossip and how they were used to shame people to respect the expectations of and conform to society. The case studies presented are snap shots over time. If people didn't adhere to the so-called norm, then they were excluded and gossip was used as a form of silent violence towards the people who were the targets. Arbuckle also points out that Thomas Aquinas argued that the desire to act violently is the result of people being shamed, and that sociologist Samuel Heilman speaks of gossip as "surreptitious aggression which enables one to wrest power, manipulate, and strike out at another without the other's being able to strike back".¹⁶

The gender analysis factor is also brought into focus around the topic of gossip when there is a feeling within society that only women gossip. Jones explores women's oral culture and discusses how women's gossip is an aspect of how females use language. She divides gossip into four categories: house-talk, scandal, bitching, and chatting. Jones concludes in her paper that gossip is a staple of women's lives and that any study of gossip is a study of women's concerns and as such a key to the female subculture.¹⁷

¹⁵ Balázs Szekfű and Zsuzsanna Szvetelszky. "Three Degrees of Inclusion: the Gossip-Effect in Human Networks." *AIP Conference Proceedings* 776, no. 1 (June 21, 2005): 308-313.

¹⁶ Gerald A. Arbuckle. *Violence, Society, and the Church: A Cultural Approach*. (Liturgical Press, 2004), 79, 81, 77.

¹⁷ Deborah Jones. "Gossip: notes on women's oral culture." (*Women's Studies International Quarterly*, 1980), 193, 197.

However, Johnson and Meinhof respond to Jones by bringing to light the idea of moving away from traditional assumptions that gossip is a way of talking uniquely found between women, and argue that men also participate in gossip. They use the discussions that men have around football as an example in their study.¹⁸ Code warns that feminist readings should not make too much or too little of the instrumental use that gossip offers. Her appeal is to the unruliness of gossip and that is not essentially good or even, not just for men or just for women, private or public and to recognize its power and danger.¹⁹

In all of these studies, gossip is seen as a form of communication that is more informal and could be used in a way to build trust between social groups. Within the church, information is shared as a means of feeling connected. However, when someone appears to be on the outside of that social circle, even though they are technically part of the community, gossip can become a method of rejection. It is within this form of exclusion where power dynamics are seen, and people are shamed into their place on the social hierarchy.

While these studies are greatly informative, the gaps in these studies show up when we consider the effects on the person as a result of gossip. This area is being discussed in many of the written resources, but not in a more detailed study of how it affects one's faith and/or ministry. There is great need for further study of these effects on the church by engaging in particular field observations with a focus on human society and culture, as well as the reactions and implications on one's faith in relation to gossip. We need to dive into the behaviours, beliefs, and attitudes of churchgoers to see how

¹⁸ Sally Johnson and Ulrike Hanna Meinhof. *Language and Masculinity*. (Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1997), 131.

¹⁹ Lorraine Code. *Rhetorical Spaces: essays on gender spaces locations*. (Routledge, 1995), 152.

gossip affects them personally and, by extension, their faith. Gaps in the present research can begin to be filled through the use of narrative, ethnography, and grounded theory in order to find a deeper meaning around gossip and its effects.

Theologically, it is appropriate to seek out truths. This research is important because in a time when church numbers are declining and smaller congregations are closing, the need to build trust within one's congregation is more important than ever. We need to trust that we will be loved, accepted, and be welcomed as part of a Christian family, a family that supports one another and cares for one another. The faith and spiritual well-being of all the members and leaders of the church are important in order to not lose focus on our call to be Christ's disciples.

The research from the study of how gossip effects one's faith and/or ministry will build on the previous research by exploring , through the use of narrative the phenomena of communication through gossip, and how gossip is viewed. It will depart from the current and previous research by taking a more theological approach in studying the effects on one's faith when gossip becomes an issue in the church.

This research will contribute to not only current church members and ministry personnel but also those seeking to find God and a safe place to worship God. Christianity is about community and as such, the exploration of the effects of gossip on one's faith and/or ministry resonates within every aspect and structure of the church. To reveal these effects will aid in helping to deal with the issue of gossip, and will be more reflective of our Christian values.

Method

The research qualitative methods that were used for this graduate research project began with a narrative process to gather data from participants to establish a grounded theory. “Stories, also called “narrative have become a popular source of data in qualitative research. The key to this type of qualitative research is the use of stories as data, and more specifically, first-person accounts of experience told in story form having a beginning, middle and end.”²⁰ It was important to hear the individual stories in order to explore the themes and categories that emerged. “Narrative in my sense is not merely linguistic and textual... The stories we tell emerge from, and can then refigure, the narrative structure of our own experience. Consequently, the way we understand, express, and communicate our experiences is derived from and dependent on that prior narrative structure of our lives.”²¹ This would aid in seeing what kind of grounded theory would be revealed through open, axial, and selective coding extracted from the narrative text. “As is true in other forms of qualitative research, the investigator as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis assumes an inductive stance and strives to derive meaning from the data. The end result of this type of qualitative study is a theory that emerges from, or is “grounded” in, the data – hence grounded theory.”²²

To recruit participants I sent a notice/general invitation to different churches and church boards, asking them to put the invitation in their bulletins and online notices. I created a YouTube video requesting participants and shared it through social networks like Facebook as well as through personal emails. All participants were asked to make

²⁰ Sharan B. Merriam. *Qualitative Research*. (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2009), 32.

²¹ Mark Johnson. *Moral Imagination: Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics*. (The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 163.

²² Sharan B. Merriam. *Qualitative Research*. (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2009), 28.

direct contact via the email address provided on the Request for Participants information. The email address given was password protected and all correspondence deleted once interviews were completed. Participants were sought from both rural and urban communities, and were either congregants or ministry personnel in a Christian denomination.

The distinguishing feature that made each participant suitable for this topic was to have dealt with church gossip first hand either by witnessing it or being part of it. One goal was to collect first hand narratives of experiences with church gossip and how it was handled. Participants were also asked to share their advice on how to better deal with church gossip in both the negative and positive forms. Participants were emailed a copy of the consent form that included information about the research study, which was required to be completed and I asked them to send it back to me before any interview was arranged. At any time participants could back out of the research project.

Data Collection

A total of 7 participants between the ages of mid 20's to mid 60's were interviewed. There were four women; *Naomi*, *Sophia*, *Esther* and *Elizabeth*. There were three men; *Matthew*, *Peter* and *Daniel*. Each participant selected his or her own biblical names and identified themselves as either ministry personnel or congregant. Participants had denominational backgrounds (either current or past) in the Roman Catholic, Anglican, United Church, Salvation Army, Presbyterian, and Baptist denominations.

Three of my participants would consider themselves currently in urban settings, while the other four were in rural settings. However, all noted that their experiences

could represent either rural or urban areas because many of them have moved around. Participants currently represent a total of four Provinces within Canada and are all actively involved in a Christian church.

The interview locations were selected by the participants and included: public meeting places that allowed for privacy of the participant; through Google +, which is a confidential one to one online meeting space; and one interview done through a conference call. All interviews were audio recorded.

Each participant was asked a series of eight open-ended questions during their 45 minute interview. All seven of the interviews were transcribed, and the data from narratives were coded and then later used to put forth theories about the nature of church gossip. This qualitative research project included the open coding of all transcribed interviews and the implementation of axial coding to see the categories and themes that arose from their combined interviews. The final coding stage - called selective coding - brought the research back to answer the original interview questions and the overall qualitative research question to create a grounded theory.

Data Analysis

Identified Themes

Participants shared their ideas around why people gossip in the church and gave suggestions on how to keep gossip positive. They discussed how we currently deal with gossip, where is God in gossip?, what a “good” church looks like, the importance of training church leaders, the negative effects of not sharing information within a faith community and the overall affects of positive and negative gossip. During the axial coding phase many themes surfaced including:

- how one defines gossip,
- the alienation church gossip created,

- feelings of being tested,
- divisions,
- fear associated with church gossip,
- suggestions around training,
- accountability,
- good gossip/good church

Definition

The term “gossip” was identified as a negative and malicious form of communication.

Daniel: “Generally when I think of gossip, I tend to think of the malicious, hurtful stuff. But when I really think about it, I guess it is really any time when we are talking about someone who is not there.”

It was seen as secretive with no regard for fairness or respect concerning the people being gossiped about.

Esther: “My general understanding of gossip is when something happens and it’s not yours to tell. It is shared amongst different people and it is usually exaggerated or taken out of context... The drive and motivation behind it is not pure.”

This form of gossip was viewed as disrespectful, not of God or a characteristic of Christ.

Naomi: “Gossip to me is when it is malicious, harmful, intentionally wants to bring another person down and is not very faithful to what Christ tells us. So for me, gossip is something we all do because we all, whether we are aware of it or not, engage in conversations that could be harmful, but the goal for me more and more now as I’m in this journey of mine, is to make sure when I’m speaking of someone it’s something I can tell them to their face.”

The person doing the gossiping appeared to be using this form of communication in an egotistical manner, and participants warned that it does come back on the perpetrator when this form of gossip was malicious it holds no accountability.

Elizabeth: “Too often it ends up that the person who is the perpetrator ends up hurt. It always ends up it seems, with a negative impact more often than not.”

Many warned it can start as silly exaggerated information that quickly can turn malicious and cause great hurt.

However, the spreading of good news or good gossip, could promote pastoral care and a sense of community belonging. Some participants didn't like the term “gossip”, because they felt that term carried with it a lot of negative baggage. They preferred to call it a form of social communication.

With all this in mind, malicious gossip was mainly defined as a sin.

Peter: “I think gossip is a great sin and I believe in a literal heaven and a literal hell, and when we think of sins that people go to punishment for, we think of murder, we think of all of those terrible things, but really a gossipy spirit, a spirit that delights in seeing other people brought low, that to me is just as bad as anything else and it shows me where people are in their relationship with God when they engage and don't engage in gossip.”

The issue with gossip becoming malicious was of great concern.

Esther: “In the church it is huge. I have been a witness and experienced it. I had to deal with a lot of grief in regards to the hurt caused by gossip. Also, confronting lies about it, concerning myself or other people. The damage of the gossip around hurt and alienation caused disconnect within the church. And it is across the board a lot of times. It could come from the pulpit, the minister could be doing it, or it could be the old ladies that have nothing better to do than to talk on the phone.”

However, it is not just older women who gossip, but something that all humans have and do participate in. Participants agreed that everyone was capable of gossiping.

Elizabeth: “Yes because we all have emotions and whether or not we are being driven by the good or the bad emotions that is how we are going to respond.”

Participants felt that gossip in the church could be useful if it was kept as a form of positive social communication. The spreading of good news could promote pastoral care and a sense of community belonging.

It was when the gossip was negative or malicious that it didn't have a place in the community of faith believers, and in those moments there were feelings of disappointment and sadness.

Matthew: "Disappointment. We are all capable of gossip. I have gossiped before. I try not to. I consciously try not to, but in conversations it is a fine line."

Alienation

Those who participate in gossip may find it entertaining, and to be "in the know" creates solidarity with other gossipers.

Peter: "If someone has a failure in their life or we perceive it as a failure we feel that, "Oh my life isn't as bad as that". So I think there is a lot of that within the environment of a church too."

This kind of relationship building identifies a pecking order where the ones who are in the know are at the top and feel superior.

Esther: "I just get this spirit of darkness. Like it is secretive and it is not of God. And it is hurt and fear. It is almost like they question their abilities and they fear. So they have to bring other people down because they have to be above them."

Negative forms of gossip may happen because the individual who is gossiping feels a loss of power which can create a misguided agenda driven by emotions. Sophia points out you have to be intentional when trying not to fall into the trap of church gossip that can cause alienation.

Sophia: "I tend to surround myself with people who are really positive, who have goals and dreams, who like to read and work hard. They just don't take the time to lower themselves into the place where they have

nothing better to do than talk about other people. There are way more positive things to be doing. So yeah, I just don't hang around with people who do that."

When participants encountered malicious church gossip they felt a loss of confidence and a sense of alienation for not only the ones being gossiped about, but also the gossipers.

Elizabeth: "When I was part of the gossip that would have hurt the whole parish, I had to see I was a part of it, but not the whole story. It hurts my relationship. The other thing about gossip is it is behind somebody's back and it just destroys any sense of trust. How do you have a relationship with somebody, a parishioner, when you can't trust them?"

Tested

Participants who experienced malicious gossip in the church were affected in their relationship with the church, but made it clear it did not affect their relationship with God.

Matthew: "It doesn't affect my faith. People basically do things. This is where I have a hard time, because some people stop going to church and stop believing in God because of what somebody did. I feel sad about that. I separate God from the actions of people. You know, God is a part of me. God is part of everybody. Even though someone may be gossiping one day, there is still good in them. There is still a lot of good in them. But I don't blame God for what people do."

Faith in the church structure was tested at times, and there was a sense of great disappointment and sadness in the faith community. The enormous amount of hurt that gossip created left participants feeling spiritually drained and questioning the intentions of everyone within the church.

Peter: "For whatever motivation they had I don't know, but 'I'm going to bring him down a peg', and yeah they did. They don't know they did it, but they did. At least in my spirit, I felt pretty low."

Questions around where God is, in association with church gossip, came up in dealing with how one's faith was affected.

Elizabeth: “At times it tests you. It has to test you. You have to think to yourself, where is God in this act? My whole faith is rooted in that whole thing, and in Genesis God said it was good, God said it was good, God said it was good. And then you are confronted with this really nasty stuff and it is like “Oh, this is the way the church acts?”

People were scared, stressed and felt that they were enveloped in secrecy when gossip was malicious. Many just expected more from their church community and were left in despair.

Matthew: “I do. I expect if you are going to be a Christian, if you are going to make that commitment then be committed fully to being a Christian. Jesus went to the sinners; he didn't walk away from them.”

Many of the participants were trying to see how they could learn from these experiences, and where the Holy Spirit might be, as a way to aid them in finding meaning. The quest to be enabled by the Spirit seemed quite clear for those trying to identify how one can learn from the experiences of malicious gossip, and how to continue on in a positive way within the Christian faith.

Naomi: “That is the only reason I can do it is because of the faith and belief that the Holy Spirit works where two or three are gathered. Regardless of whether you are Christian or not, my prayers in God let me be your instrument, let me bring your love and your message no matter what it is, let it be speaking for you.”

The malicious act was not glorifying God, but what could one learn from it in order to work things out? There was a need to ask, “What would Jesus say about this?”

Elizabeth: “In my opinion he wouldn't be happy at all. “Don't fight” is what Jesus told the Disciples when they said, “I'm better than you are,” and so it's not about being better, it's not about being judgmental. It is the gossip that sometimes becomes judgmental, it's the gossip that has a personal agenda, when it's not Christ like and when it's not for the benefit of the community of the faithful.”

Divisions

Participants felt that malicious church gossip could create situations where people turned away from the church because they didn't know how to deal with it.

Esther: "Most definitely divisions within the church. I think it does. Divisions, the whole atmosphere of the church, also the growth, and lack of growth in the church."

This created a time of challenge, feelings of stress, discomfort, and other emotions very much similar to dealing with the trials of grief.

Naomi: "You would like to think it should be better in the church but the reality is, it is not, because the church is full of the people of the world. The church is more of the world than the Holy Spirit and that might be the reason the church really isn't succeeding anymore, because we are not really."

Participants saw a lot of fear develop around any type of communication that could be seen as gossiping. The malicious gossip that was encountered was identified as not being Christ like and there was this sense that gossip had forgotten how to be a good neighbour.

Esther: "I feel like as Christians there is a lot of pride, unfortunately, and that is not one of the characteristics of Christ. He is not prideful. And we are supposed to be made like him. It is almost like people go beyond themselves to cover up things, to make face, to put on a mask, to keep up appearances. It involves putting someone else down in the church, because everybody is on the pecking order, apparently, and we need to be comparing each other, instead of identifying with people on spiritual gifting."

When having to deal with malicious gossip some felt it took more energy from the work of the church which was stressful.

Elizabeth: "Tiring. Frustrating. It made me angry at times, which I had to keep in check. I'm a human being too. I want to react like a human being. Then I have to think, "who am I, where's my place in this?" So ministry has taught me a lot about that, but it's tiring, time consuming, and frustrating."

People were not maintaining confidentiality and people were very sensitive about sharing even good news. The lines identifying good and bad gossip were blurred; communication started to cease. This affected relationships within the church. However, others who saw this actively made it a point to talk openly about everything with one another, but intentionally kept it out of malicious places.

Sophia: “I think that any little tidbits of what I hear are told to me in the manner that we look at ourselves as being people who are Disciples of Christ. That we look out for our neighbours and we look out for each other. In the years that I have spent with this Charge they have developed close connections, trying to really to care about each other and take that care into the community. I think part of our church identity as people of faith, we want others to see us as Christians living out our every day gospel and looking out for each other. I think that we want people to know us by our actions as much as seeing us go to church on Sundays.”

The participants of this study stated that church gossip did not make them leave the Christian denomination altogether and were still very active in a Christian church as either ministry personnel or congregants. Given the scope of this sample I don't have evidence of people leaving the church due to gossip, but this could be an effect. (This is very much a limit of my sample group and can't be ruled out.) Matthew just wished there was a better image in the secular world for today's Christian church.

Matthew: “It sometimes makes me sad to be a Christian living in an environment where Christians are not accepted. That goes into a whole new topic with the secular state today, post modernism, and everything else. It's not cool to be a Christian anymore.”

Fear

One area that was brought up that affected ministry leadership was in places where church members refused to discuss anything for fear they were gossiping.

Daniel: “And so there is none of that movement of Christian care and concern that I'm witnessing myself and it. “It” being the lack of gossip,

really cripples any effort for Christian care and concern to be moved amongst the people in the community either. So instead of being in a place where I'm surrounded by people who care, I'm in a place essentially surrounded by strangers who happen to worship together. They don't know anything about each other because they don't talk."

The ministry leader felt crippled by this. People were just not sharing information at all with each other, or with the ministry leadership. The fear of gossiping made people just not talk to one another about anything. No one had any idea what was safe to share, so the minister couldn't respond in an appropriate manner to the needs of the faith community.

Leaders in this situation felt like they were living in a bubble, and the aloofness of the faith community in sharing information created a lot of stress. Ministers felt they couldn't offer the care and concern in a proper pastoral response, because they were left out of the loop.

Daniel: "Being a rural setting, gossip happens over tea in peoples' living rooms, so the only way for me to be in the midst of the conversations that were happening is to spend basically every waking moment not in my house. I can't afford to put that much effort into pastoral presence. Completely out of the loop. Crippled. It's as if there is a bubble that exists around the manse."

Another phenomenon that created fertile ground for fear was when people used the parking lot to avoid dealing with issues directly.

Matthew: "After the meeting a group of people who have a bone to chew will meet together and rile each other up. That is "a parking lot meeting". I think parking lot meetings tend to promote the agenda of one or two specific people over the group, because if the group is meeting constructively there should be no need for a parking lot meeting. It is fear of approaching the person directly and so anger takes place and what results is nothing is accomplished."

Training

A common theme when dealing with negative gossip was the need to train church leaders through facilitated leadership workshops in ways of dealing with malicious gossip, and giving the leaders of the church tools to keep gossip positive. Some also suggested that this was not for just the “youth” of the church, but for everyone to take part in, because everyone was capable of malicious gossip.

Esther: “And it is not just among teens. There is gossip among adults and it is like they have been content with the norm of that. I’m choosing in my life to not be a part of the gossip and going to the person directly to tell them.”

By offering training in dealing with gossip, churches wouldn’t have to fear that sharing information at anytime is bad, and would learn how to recognize good news versus bad news or malicious gossip.

Daniel: “I think that with training perhaps a congregation might be able to point gossip in ways that becomes useful. For example, gossip would include things coming back to the minister, so that I can know that so-and-so is sick or this person had a car accident or heaven forbid, so-and-so is having trouble with their marriage, or any of that stuff because then there are pastoral opportunities that can come out of those cares and concerns.”

This would build confidence in the church community as it becomes common to spread good (or useful) news in many forms and ways.

Elizabeth: “Continuing ways of being able to move people from a gossip oriented culture to a spirit given culture, where it is more about concern for the individual then anything like a power game or maliciousness.”

We can do this by equipping leaders with tools that focus on the positive, and ways to give affirming power to all those involved.

Esther: “That the leadership would be able to call out gossip if they see it happening and have leaders of small groups trained, facilitated trained. Trained to know how to see the signs of it and how to address it, without

causing as much collateral damage to the small group or church. It starts with leadership. It has to start with training.”

Most participants see that in many instances, gossip is handled in the church by not actually handling it.

Matthew: “It is not handled very well by most churches. In fact I’m not even sure, as much as I’m saying I would like to do stuff, I’m sure I missed some opportunities to handle it in the past.”

When the gossip is malicious, this ignorance can create cycles of hurt where people feel powerless and not affirmed by the situation.

Esther: “Equipping the leadership, especially the leadership, but also your deacons and everyone not to be vessels of gossip. Have accountability amongst your leadership, so that is not happening. It is very important, and when it is an issue that it is addressed directly and dealt with immediately and appropriately.”

Partakers of church gossip don’t want to look weak, are insecure and tend to use malicious gossip as a way of self preservation. As such, their behaviour comes across as quite selfish in nature. The harmful impact of churches covering up malicious gossip left a lot unknown, and this created brutal feelings where things got even more complicated. Participants felt the church acted as compassionately as possible, but again, not enough care or instruction was provided for leaders when handling such situations, and that was then reflected in the response.

Peter: “What was done really well was that they didn’t believe what was said. Although part of me appreciated that fact. However, they didn’t even ask me about it, in retrospect, I felt they should have.”

Accountability

Participants agreed that malicious gossip should be handled directly and openly, and people should be held accountable in a way that affirmed everyone.

Peter: “Well if I was in an environment where people were sharing something inappropriate about another person, at the very minimum I would walk away from the conversation, or quickly try to turn it onto something else. At the maximum, as a spiritual leader, I would say something to the effect of like, “You know this isn’t appropriate what we are doing, we should be affirming this person, and if you can’t affirm them it would be better not to speak about them in this way.” So yeah, it might take some courage to actually do that ... but I like to think that is how I would handle it now.”

While dealing with the issue of malicious church gossip directly was the key, Matthew shared some warnings on that.

Matthew: “Making the person aware that I am aware that they are gossiping and hopefully having them open up to me why they are saying those things. I might even take it as far as getting the two affected people together if I felt that was necessary. But that would be something I have to do very, very carefully. Because often when we are in conflict and you integrate into that conflict, sometimes you become the enemy.”

Others felt that if it is malicious it needs to be named as malicious.

Elizabeth: “Well I was very transparent about it. I named it as gossip. I named it as malicious gossip. The sad part about that is, the person that was spreading the gossip looked stupid, looked bad, and ended up discredited. I don’t know how else to have accomplished it without rolling over and saying “Here, destroy the parish.” I don’t know.”

Participants suggested preaching on it, and devoting energy to positive features of the church by being transparent and dealing with all issues head on out of a loving place.

They felt that the church needed to truth talk and to seek out accountability.

Esther: “Preach it from the pulpit, because it is across the board. Everybody needs to hear it. So if they are hearing it then the 80 year old at the back spending 8 hours a day on the phone talking to her friends needs to hear it too.”

They expected more from the church in response to malicious gossip, and for gossipers to be approached and dealt with issues directly. They felt there should be an effort to confront the issues and investigate the gossip to seek the truth and name what it

is. The takeaway: Be community focused and thank people in sermons for the good they do, because this will allow wisdom to speak and give others the confidence needed to not partake in malicious gossip.

Elizabeth: “Keep it in front of their face that gossip can be malicious, it can be harmful, and we needed to be reminded, but not in a demonizing way. So keep the positive spin on. Build up the good things, and in a way it helps people set aside the bad stuff. In my previous parish there was very little gossip, and it was what I would probably call one of the healthiest rural communities in Canada, because peace and harmony were so important to the people in that community that they intentionally did not gossip.”

Good Gossip

Participants agreed that the spreading of good news or good gossip was very useful in the church, because it allows for positive information to be communicated. In this case the sense of community and protection of each other is greatly heightened, as is the sense of solidarity.

Sophia: “I would say that for me, as a preacher, it has been really affirming in that we are not talking about people behind each other’s backs. If someone is having a hard time or that there is a care or concern that perhaps I’m not aware of, someone will gently let me know what is going on. It just really affirms what we talk about at church as the need to be there for each other and to be there as a community of God’s faithful.”

People who were intentionally positive found it promoted respect within the community, and when news that wasn’t so good was shared, there was a sense of pastoral care and not maliciousness behind it.

Daniel: “And for me there needs to be a sense of community. Community knows about each other, community leans on each other, community understands what is going on, and when someone in community has trouble, the rest of the community is there for support. You can’t support someone if you don’t know they need help.”

This intentionality helped people keep in touch with members of the faith community, and the faith community felt supported. The pastoral concern was followed by a response, and everyone felt in the loop and part of a true community that fostered support and care. This created heartfelt action through the use of prayer and pastoral response. The environment created mutual respect with helpful sharing of information, and showed an act of love that built trusting relationships. Participants commented that this kind of use of good gossip was considered healthy for the Christian church or what one might call “good church”.

Esther: “A safe environment where the leadership would be very open and honest, so one could be vulnerable. Not above anybody else, express their own weaknesses, struggles and to allow a safe environment for other people to share.”

A good church was people living in relationship with each other. They built up the good things and were there for each other in the hard times. This type of focus went beyond just inside the doors of the church, but out into the greater community and world.

Elizabeth: “I was sent to love and care for every single person in the community, not just the parish, the community. I mean you really have to think about how you are going to respond to every single person in a loving way.”

The church promoted a spirit-given culture that did the work of God and acted upon Christ’s teachings. The faith community used social communication, like good gossip, to create a sharing environment that felt different and warm. The space was safe, where one could be vulnerable, and the tightly knit atmosphere was not isolating but instead community oriented. When Daniel remembered the church he grew up in, he commented on the safe and caring environment.

Daniel: “Like they cared enough to want to know what was going on and then knowing what was going on they would come out and seek me out in

constructive ways. Like I said, everyone knew everyone else's business to some degree, but for me the church was a very safe place."

Participants felt this would give the church a better image and allow people to be accountable to each other as Christians in an affirming way.

Naomi: "It is a place where we are vulnerable and see each other regularly. If we are in small communities we know enough about each other so it is that fine line between, "Is it gossip, or is it just noticing?"."

This was not just about fluff, but a sincere community of believers who were supportive and accountable to each other on their faith journey. This kind of church would allow people to move from malicious forms of gossip, and use those techniques to spread productive and helpful news, for the church community's well being.

Have you done it?

All participants confirmed they had partaken in church gossip in both the negative and positive forms. There was a sense that this was a form of entertainment, especially when they were younger, but as they got older they realized how using gossip in more positive ways was more of an overall benefit.

Peter: "You know it was entertainment when I was younger. Yeah, I mean I have certainly participated in gossip and I feel remorse that I did it because I see, I have experienced the results of that."

Some felt that being the topic of malicious gossip allowed them to have empathy, and to recognize when to name it as malicious gossip and slow it down or stop it all together. Matthew shared how he dealt with realizing he was partaking in church gossip.

Matthew: "Prayed for one thing. I prayed, God help me to not do this. Lord help with this. I am human and need your help Lord. When I see myself slipping from my high Christian standards, which I do on occasion, I pray for guidance to be the way God wants me to be and I also found the few times I did gossip there is this sense of anger. You are talking about someone and I'm not sure if the anger is masking the guilt. I'm not made to be a gossip. I pay for it with guilt if I do gossip."

Gossip Graph

This qualitative research study found that the intent of the gossiper, how the gossip was defined in relation to positive or malicious, the need for leadership training to aid in more productive communication, and the idea of using the finely tuned technique of gossip in positive ways, all played key roles when in looking at how church gossip affected one's faith and/or ministry.

The following graph explores how the participants of this study evaluated the social communication of church gossip to make up this grounded theory. When communicating, the intent of those sharing information played a key role in determining if the information would be considered benign, malignant or even life saving.

- Malignant is information sharing that is harmful with malicious intent. There is this sense of unfairness and to cause hurt for those being talked about. The end result is the death of open and productive communication that gives life to a community.
- Benign is information sharing that is harmless and the intent behind the sharing of the information is from a place of genuine caring and respect. There is no malice intent and the information shared is something that would be shared directly with the person or persons involved.
- Life Saving is information sharing that explores how to keep communication within a church community healthy. It looks at effective and helpful ways of communicating and makes these aspects part of its everyday. There is a real understanding and respect for what is to be shared and what is to be considered confidential.

Malignant	Benign	Life Saving
Not Accountable	Sharing Good News	Living in relationship
Not a characteristic of Christ/not of God	Being empathetic	Joyful spirit filled
Tearing down someone/intentionally negative	Build up the good	Walking with God and with each other
Intentional disrespect	Helpful sharing	Not isolating
No regard for fairness/establishing pecking order	A response with caring	Growing in spirit
Secretive	Heartfelt prayer	Churched together
Main goal to divide	Emphasis on positive action	People endorse the faith (spreading the good news)
Creates mistrustful environments	Truth talk	Safe to be vulnerable
Creates doubt	Promoting respect	Christ oriented
Feeling unwelcomed and not accepted	Showing support	Lifelong commitment
Lack of honesty	Inclusive	Outward/inward looking and healing
Aggressive/not respectful of boundaries	Intentionally positive	Not alienating
Alienation/exclusive	Showing faith in someone	Offers confidence to grow
Not affirming	Creating trusting bonds	Respectful of boundaries (privacy/confidentiality)

Evaluation and Implication for Pastoral Theology and Ministry

In this section, I will address the biblical and theological background pertaining to how church gossip can affect one's faith and/or ministry.

This issue has been present throughout the very beginnings of Christian faith itself. The implications of church gossip are as real in today's social context as they were in biblical times. This topic may not be new, but our ways of responding to the web of

realities that are created by such a form of communication have developed and changed with the changing context of the society in which we live. Information is continuously moving from point A to point B and beyond, but the methods by which that flow of information are spread and understood can be vastly different and often insidious.

Narrative was used to spread the concepts and stories of Christ's teachings on how to live in community: the Good News. Those who considered themselves followers of the faith were a tightly knit community of believers, and information was shared as a way of being accepted as part of the group. It also showed how trustworthy you were with the shared information.

To be part of the group you were exposed to the beliefs and innermost workings of that association. This was seen in the building of the early church. This form of what one might consider "good" gossip was about the sharing within that community. Gossip was a building of trust by sharing information among those in the community to build the connectedness of that community.

Gossip is used to maintain the dividing line between those who are part of the 'in group' and those who are not. To gossip is to indicate that the teller and the recipient share a degree of closeness or intimacy not necessarily shared with others. Thus, gossip can be a sign of trust between people which can create and maintain boundaries 'in-group' members.²³

This form of gossip would have affected the faith of the hearers and eventually the followers of Christianity by building on the inside rapport of such a community.

²³ Jack Levin, and Arnold Arluke, *Gossip: The Inside Scoop*. (Plenum Press, 1987) 24, as quoted in Donald Capps. *Living Stories*. (Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1998), 180.

However, the very act of the insider versus the outsider could be perceived as going against the teachings of Jesus Christ. Jesus says in John 13:34-35, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Jesus doesn't say only to love those within your group or those who are of like mind, but to love one another. To love one another is to not exclude the so called “other” or even to recognize them as the “other”. If information is shared selectively – even if it isn't malicious – this can be seen as exclusivity.

Even where gossip is not malicious or degrading of another person, the fact that it supports exclusivity, favours in-groupism, and is entertaining, implies that it is more to be tolerated than valued in an egalitarian society. Also, if gossip has an effect outside the in-group (that is, actually becomes a rumor and/or actually hurts the person it is about), it is considered trivial. Its potential for malice or triviality outweighs its positive effects, such as its role supporting and confirming the shared values of those who engage in it.²⁴

Participants in this qualitative research study qualified malicious church gossip as a sin. The question then is, does our participation in the sin of malicious gossip offer us a pause for redemption and as such in that moment can we acknowledge and act as God would?

²⁴ Donald Capps. *Living Stories*. (Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1998), 180.

Our participation in that high calling requires us to understand God's grace as something more than the infinite remission of our sins. If we want to take part in the divine work of redemption, then we will also understand God's grace as the gift of regeneration – the very real possibility of new life right here on earth – complete with new vision, new values, and new behaviour.²⁵

This new reality allows us to look closely at our church communities and who they are in a new way in order to define them and respond to them.

Sometimes the definition of “the other” was confused by the early followers of Jesus when asking who was to be considered their neighbour. Jesus defined who a neighbour was when he used the example of the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10, and after sharing the parable with his disciples, he says to the lawyer in Luke 10: 36-37, “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

Going out and creating a larger group of believers, is one of the missions of the Christian Church. We are to spread the Good News. When one accepts the teachings of Christ and decides to be part of a Christian community, it is important that there be a feeling of acceptance by such a group. The church community becomes an important social network in one's life.

Historically, we see the sharing of information as a large part of community building. Again, because there is such a strong oral tradition in Christianity, there is a

²⁵ Barbara Brown Taylor. *Speaking of Sin*. (Cowley Publications, 2000), 5.

sense of acceptance once information is shared. “Many people tell others various bits of information, but the issue raised is whether we should consider all who bring “gossip”, which is news, not slander, as having a formal role.”²⁶ The idea of the gossiper having a formal role might be a bit of a stretch when looking at the overall context of gossip. Instead, we see the spreading of the news as more of an overall group participation that leaves opportunity for persons to either be actively the listeners and/or actively the sharers. “Spreading news does not seem to entail any formal role; there emerges no recognized system of rights and duties characteristic of “roles.” Anyone can be a conduit of information about any topic.”²⁷ Where the news is coming from, the intent with which it is shared, and how it might affect the hearers, are all important questions to look at when deciding if what you are hearing is so-called gossip or just news. “When two or more persons gossip together, they give voice to a point of view that is mutually shared, and one that reflects their location in a subculture that is different from if not antagonistic to the dominant culture.”²⁸

Within the scriptures there are many examples where gossip is looked down upon, and we are warned against such activities. Proverbs 11:13 says, “A gossip goes about telling secrets, but one who is trustworthy in spirit keeps a confidence.” The warnings against gossip include Proverbs 13:3 which states, “Those who guard their mouths preserve their lives; those who open wide their lips come to ruin.” This is echoed in the New Testament in James 3:5, “Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark.” Such

²⁶ Jerome H. Neyrey. *The Gospel of John*. (Cambridge University Press, 2007) 26.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 96.

²⁸ Donald Capps. *Living Stories*. (Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1998) 184.

warnings continue from Jesus in Matthew 10: 26-27, “There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is said whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs.”

The concept of owning and claiming what one says is an important one in the Christian mission. Again, this emphasizes healthy communication versus malicious communication. The intent of the communication should be clear and all parties involved and informed - even those who might be within the topic. Dealing with such matters openly in a loving way allows for and encourages a healthy social community that has a positive effect on one’s faith.

Theologically, the teachings of Jesus made it clear how to deal with conflict openly, lovingly, but also very directly. This is reflected in Matthew 18: 15-16, “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses.”

All these examples show a direct, open, and loving way to communicate information within one’s community without alienating others. It is also interesting how people who encountered Jesus reacted. The radical nature of Jesus within that time was quite counter cultural and is seen in the responses of such encounters. We see this in the story of the woman at the well in John 4 when she goes back to her village to share what she just experienced:

The woman spreads “gossip” about Jesus. But she went to only one place, her village. Once she spread the news, her place in the network

ceases, just as it does for others who “gossip” about Jesus, such as the healed leper (Mark 1:45) and the Gadarene demonic (Mark 5:20).²⁹

Dealing with what was gossiped about was not new to Jesus, and he was therefore able to teach his disciples first-hand how to respond. Jesus was gossiped about, and many of the criticisms around the actions of Jesus were the topic of debate. There was ongoing tension between the Pharisees and scribes and their reactions to what Jesus says and does throughout the Gospels. However, Jesus deals with such criticism head-on as we see in Matthew 15:1-6, “Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat.” He answered them, “And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.’ But you say that whoever tells father or mother, ‘Whatever support you might have had from me is given to God,’ then that person need not honor the father. So, for the sake of your tradition, you make void the word of God.”

The disciples questioned Jesus’ responses and actions at times. Jesus responds to such criticisms as shown in Matthew 15: 17-20, “Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.”

²⁹ Jerome H. Neyrey. *The Gospel of John*. (Cambridge University Press, 2007) 96-97.

Each time Jesus was confronted with claims that he was doing something wrong, he responded to what was being said about him. There was no running from the information, no hiding from its intent; instead he responded in well thought out, brilliant ways, head-on. We can look at how Jesus dealt with these issues and theologically reflect on how we, in today's society, can respond. In many respects, it is about living out our stories together, sharing the joys, and supporting each other in the times of struggles. There will be times when we mess up, and these kinds of reactions can create moments where others feel alienated within our community. The response is to look back at how Jesus, as an effective leader, would have handled it, and Christ, as a great coach, is a wonderful example.

Great coaches... They prepare the players... They ensure that their teams are as fundamentally sound as possible. But they don't prepare the team to avoid insurmountable problems. They actually prepare the team with the expectation that these troubles will come, and that part of achieving success means overcoming these troubles. Great coaches embrace trouble and turmoil, with an understanding that unless the team encounters severe troubles, they will not be able to fulfill the essential plot: this team will overcome all troubles to eventually rise to the top and become victorious.³⁰

In preparing and in responding we have a wonderful example in Christ's for all hurts within this world. As a body of Christ, we are to work as one in the mission of Christ's church, as God's people. If one's faith is affected by the results of actions within

³⁰ Larry A. Goleman. *Living Our Story*. (The Alban Institute, 1989) 70-71.

our church, such as church gossip, especially if it is malicious, we need to respond in times of trouble as we do in times of joy: not to hide, but to deal with issues lovingly and head-on. To not do that would go against the theological makeup of who we are as Christians.

The implications of not understanding the social network of communication can result in misunderstandings and miscommunication and as such, alienate people. This goes against who we are and who we are supposed to be. The exploration into the effects of church gossip on the faith of a person and/or their ministry allows us to see how we need to respond.

Faith is an important part of Christianity, and if it is being affected we need to respond as a faith community. There are implications for the church and theology when church gossip is malicious. For one, it creates division. Christianity is about unity, and even though denominations don't always see eye-to-eye on aspects of the Christian tradition, we all pray for unity as Jesus prayed in John 17.

At the 41st General Council Meeting of The United Church of Canada held in Ottawa August 11-18, 2012, out of the 130 proposals for action, one was on taking a stand against spreading of gossip (MNWO2 –GC41 2012-038d). The proposal was amended and carried with the following actions: 1) encourage congregations to seek ways to raise awareness of the harmful aspects of gossip; 2) encourage congregations to open discussion regarding how to differentiate between gossip and a caring pastoral conversation.

Conclusion

This qualitative research through narratives from all seven participants came to four main conclusions to create a grounded theory:

- Using the fine tuned technique of gossiping for good communication, pastoral communication, and productive communication, can actually aid the Christian community. This form of a well practiced communication technique might just have a role in our church today when used pastorally, effectively and without maliciousness.
- The church leaders and the many the many church committees that exist within all Christian denominations could play an important role in modeling good techniques of communication through training workshops that aid in accountability.
- Church gossip defined as either “malicious” or “positive” needs to be closely looked at by not only those sharing information, but by those in the church community who experience both negative and positive forms of gossip. Our response as Christians is important since one response could be to stop the malicious behaviour, while the other could be to celebrate joys with church members, or even identify a need for pastoral care.
- The intent of the person sharing the information is an important indicator to help define whether this gossip is intended to affirm or to harm. We need to look at our intent when sharing information with one another. Under that microscope, perhaps we can truly love our neighbour as ourselves, and above all love God with all our heart, soul, and mind.

All participants agreed that gossip is harmful in the church when it is malicious because it creates divisions that are difficult to repair. Accountability is an important component, but this also needs to come out of a place of love and not be malicious in its own nature. Participants who found out they were being maliciously gossiped about felt a relief that others didn't believe the malicious gossip and the healing process started. It was in those moments that they felt the support of the church community, because people were very sympathetic and they felt respected.

Is church gossip prophecy or profanity? It is both. In the end, the Christian church is focused around a communal theology. We are to be as one, to be a faith community that lives in a supportive, accountable, well communicated environment that reflects who Christ was and is.

The future direction that research should take in the area of church gossip is to look at how such behaviours coincide with church decline, ministry personnel burnout, and skepticism around religion. If gossip is being used as a means of power, control, and as a form of violence, should it not be dealt with through a set policy similar to those applied to other bad behaviours? If gossip is being used as a form of communication, why are people steering away from talking to the persons involved and getting the actual information from where the gossip originates?

Taking all this into account the research is clear: if we are not accountable, if we are not working as one, if we are maliciously tearing each other apart and not shedding a light on these situations, then we are an unhealthy organization failing to be a faithful Christian church.

A healthy Christian church responds in the fashion I remember as a child. As the long line of friends and neighbours drove up to our house to honour the memory of my grandfather, I saw first-hand how a kind, open, and loving church community can pass information within itself to comfort, to embrace, and to strengthen its own bonds. I saw how a healthy church can make each of its members stronger. And mostly, I saw the spirit of Christ, alive in each and every one of us.

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Appendices

Appendix A

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Title: How is one's faith and/or ministry affected by church gossip?

Rachel Anne Campbell

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I am student enrolled in the Master of Divinity Degree Programme at Atlantic School of Theology. As a part of my course work under the supervision of the Dr. Susan Willhauck. I am conducting a study on the affects of church gossip on ones faith and or ministry interviewing people who are church members or leaders in both urban and rural communities to participate. I am inviting you to participate in my study. The purpose of the work is to examine what ideas and experiences have occurred around gossip in the church. The purpose of this work is two fold: First, to increase the body of knowledge that we have on the topic of gossip in the church. Second, explore how these themes might filter into the life of the church.

Your participation in this project is appreciated. The questions and the project are designed to move to the contours of your experience as you actively speak about what it is like to be a leader. The researcher will take notes and/or audiotape the conversation.

The tapes and transcript will be held in a secure environment until the completion of this course of study, at which time they will be destroyed. This project will be completed by the end of April 2014.

If you are willing to participate in this project, please read the following and indicate your willingness to be involved by giving your signature at the bottom of this page.

I acknowledge that the research procedures outlined and of which I have a copy have been explained to me. Any questions I had have been answered to my satisfaction. I know that I can contact the researcher at anytime should I have further questions. I am aware that my participation in this study is purely voluntary and I understand that I am free to withdraw from this study at any time. I understand that the personal record relating to this study will be kept confidential.

I know that the researcher will make every effort to keep all information obtained in this study as **confidential and anonymous** as possible. Names and potentially revealing facts will be changed, thus affording me anonymity. To further protect individual identities, this consent form will be sealed in an envelope and stored separately.

Furthermore, the results of this study will be aggregated and no individual participant will be identified.

The following is a time line for the storage and destruction of data:

1. Upon receiving a signed Informed Consent from research participants, I will:
 - a) provide one copy for the participants
 - b) keep one copy for myself which I will place in a envelope separate from all other materials and store in a locked file cabinet in my home office.
 - c) provide one copy for my supervisor (Dr. Willhauck), also placed in a separate envelope, who will store it in a locked file cabinet in her office at AST.
2. Audio tapes of interviews will be recorded on a digital recording device. These digital recording devices will be kept in locked brief cases or safes and secured at all times during data collection from the time of Informed Consent through the public Grad Project presentations (March 11, 12 and 13) and until deleted permanently from my device (no later than March 20).
3. Within two weeks of each interview, I will transcribe the interviews onto a Word document. The Word Document transcripts will be kept on a password protected computer from the time of data collection until the final Grad Project paper is due on March 25, 2014.
4. The public Grad Project Presentations take place on March 11, 12, and 13. On March 20, 2014 I will bring my recording device to my supervisor who will check to make sure all interviews have been deleted.
5. When the final Graduate Research paper is submitted to my supervisor on March 25, 2014, the Word Document transcripts of interviews will also be submitted to her, either printed as hard copies or disposable CDs and deleted from my computer and trash bin.
6. Dr. Willhauck will store transcripts of interviews in a locked file cabinet in her office at AST for one year and all data materials will be destroyed by shredding or crushing on April 27, 2015.

If you have any questions, please contact Rachel Campbell the principal researcher, at echogirl77@hotmail.com

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Board of Atlantic School of Theology. If you have any questions or concerns about the study, you may contact Dr. Alyda Faber at afaber@astheology.ns.ca, Chair, Research Ethics Board.

By signing this consent form, you are indicating that you fully understand the above information and agree to participate in this study.

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Please keep one copy of this form for your own records.

Appendix B

Proposed Questions:

1. What is your personal understanding of gossip and how do you feel about gossip in the church?
2. In your opinion why does church gossip happen within the church?
3. Tell me about a time when gossip in the church has affected your faith and how did this define who you are as a Christian?
4. What was it like for you when you encountered gossip within the church?
5. How has gossip been handled in your church and in what ways would you suggest that gossip could be handled in the church?
6. Give me an example of when gossip would be useful in the church and when gossip was harmful in the church?
7. In your opinion did church gossip reflect the ministry leadership of your church, and if so, how?
8. Have you ever partaken in church gossip and if so tell me more about that?

Appendix C

Invitation to Participate:

Have you ever been affected by church gossip?

Participants are needed to share your stories.

The following qualitative research study is to look at how one's faith and/or ministry have been affected by church gossip. A total of six participants will be selected to discuss their experiences around church gossip and how that has affected them and their faith. I am looking for an equal amount of participants from rural and urban areas, with a Christian church background and either a congregant or ministry personnel.

All information gathered will be confidential, no names will be used and transcripts of interviews will be destroyed after the presentation of the graduate project in March of 2014.

Participants will be asked a series of questions pertaining to the topic of church gossip. The interview session will be digitally recorded and held either face to face or through a secure online community like Google + which is a confidential online meeting space.

Researcher: Rachel Campbell

Contact info: echogirl77@hotmail.com