

## **The Sabotage of Rumours**

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Churches can be hotbeds of rumour, gossip, secrets, and third-party complaints. Sometimes gossip and rumours are innocently called "the grapevine". Some believe that grapevines have a noble ministry: to ensure that the whole community is kept informed of what is important. However, systems theory takes a dim view of rumours, gossip, and secrets.

Circulating information indirectly and secretly causes many problems. It tends to exaggeration and distortion of the facts. The person receiving the information does not understand the context of what is reported. Third-party communication can be a passive-aggressive weapon. A simple problem between two people, communicated via third-parties, may end up involving many more and spreading pain and anxiety further and further.

When people disseminate sensitive information, they may claim to communicate someone else's agenda, but they are really communicating their own anxiety. It is tempting to point fingers at people who gossip, spread rumours, and anonymously accuse. But such behavior exists only if the system permits and enables it.

### **How should we respond to rumours?**

We have to remember that we cannot change the behavior of others or force them to be responsible. Gossipmongers and complainers can make a nice target for our own gossiping and complaining, but that is no help. Congregations are called to higher functioning.

There are two main principles for ending rumours, gossip, secrets, and third-party complaints. First, since secrecy is a large part of the problem, churches and leaders should not keep secrets about secrets. Exposing secrecy is frightening, especially in congregations that are used to secrets, and when the group's norms encourage secrecy. But we can liberate ourselves: when secrets are revealed, anxiety usually decreases.