

Something to Talk About

A conversation guide for church leaders

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Church Leadership and Convoy Driving

Note: This is one of a series of articles intended to facilitate and guide church leaders' conversations about significant issues that often are not talked about among pastors, boards, and church leadership teams.

Prior articles can be found at www.efcawest.org. Click on the Church Leadership tab to get to the archive.

In 1992, there was rioting in Los Angeles. I was a lieutenant with the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, assigned to be a platoon commander, and was dispatched to help restore order and to arrest looters. My platoon consisted of about 68 personnel divided four-to-a-car among 17 police cars and one prisoner transport bus. To keep the platoon together, we utilized a technique known as "convoy driving."

Under normal circumstances, emergency responders try to get safely to the scene as quickly as possible. When responding to the scene of an emergency as a group, however, there is an added requirement. You see, the goal of convoy driving is not only to get the group to its destination as quickly as possible, but also to have them arrive *together* and ready to go to work as a team. For church leaders, getting to the desired destination together and ready to work is something to talk about.

I read a lot of church leadership material and attend many a seminar. We invest much time with the concepts of mission, vision, values, and strategy, as well as effective leadership traits, behaviors and concepts, but I seldom hear talk about leaders ensuring that their staff, leadership teams, and congregation get to the desired destination *together* and ready to work. Arriving *together* is not something we often talk about, yet it can be the difference between success and failure in many a venture.

I recently have been reading through Exodus. I was struck by the fact that God could have expedited Moses' arrival in the Promised Land by having him take a more direct route and having the Israelites try to keep up as best they could. He could have said, "Meet Me at the Promised Land." But God had other plans. He sent them on a longer route and seems to have taken great pains to have them leave Egypt and arrive at their destination *together*.

As a leader, I have found myself impatient at times with those who are not keeping up with my pace. Have you? Typically, we ask ourselves what is wrong with those we are leading, and we fail to consider whether it might be our own fast pace that is leaving them behind. Emergency responders often have difficulty keeping a convoy together, too. The lead car's commander must remember that it is his/her

responsibility to keep those who follow together – the pace must be scaled back from as fast as they can go to as fast as the convoy can go while remaining together. If the lead car moves too quickly, those in the back cannot keep up and either must drive recklessly in an attempt to do so, or they simply give up in frustration and the convoy falls apart. Remember playing “crack the whip?” That’s what it feels like to be in the rear trying to catch up to a leader who is moving too quickly. We also need to keep in mind that unnecessary twists and turns in the route to the destination tend to cause others to be unable to keep up – try to take the most direct route possible. The more direct the route, the easier it is to follow.

I have spoken with many church leaders, pastors, staff and elders alike, who have become frustrated by the failures of others to keep up with their desired pace of change. I, too, have complained about the slowness of some major changes, and I’m sure others have complained about my failures to keep up with their desired changes.

It is the leader’s responsibility to set a measured pace so that followers can keep up. If followers cannot keep up, the solution is for the leader to slow down, not to berate followers for not keeping up. I’m not sure we can truthfully say we are leading if our followers cannot keep up.

Here are some questions that can jumpstart your conversation.

- Are we as leaders going toward a well-defined destination?
- Is our route as direct as possible? What twists and turns have hurt, or might hurt our togetherness? Any lessons learned from past journeys?
- What types of decisions or changes indicate the need to keep our team or congregation together along the way? Are there destinations, decisions, or changes where arriving together might not be so important?
- Who sets the pace in the lead car? Should it always be the same person? Who on our team (staff, leadership team, or congregation) is struggling to keep up?
- What are some indications that a leader is moving so fast that teammates, followers, or the church family are having difficulty keeping up? What actions might we take to ensure that people can keep up and arrive together?
- What types of changes in our ministry context might be prone to leaders significantly outpacing those we expect to follow?
- How might we differentiate between those who are struggling or lagging behind and those who will not follow?

I must admit that it was a pretty impressive sight for 17 police cars and a big ol’ bus to show up *together*, lights flashing and sirens blaring, at the scene of the rioting. Judging from all the looters fleeing from the scene, it was much more impressive than it would have been had I, the leader, pulled up to the scene alone. What might it be like for our leadership teams and congregations to journey together and arrive *together*, ready to work on the ministries to which God has called us? That’s something to talk about.

Let us know how your conversation goes. Contact Bob Osborne by e-mail at bob.osborne@efca.org.