

# Something to Talk About – A conversation guide for church leaders

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## One Chance to Get It Right Defining Moments and Lessons from the NFL

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

In case you have missed the news for the past couple of months, the National Football League (NFL) has been in a swarm of controversy in the media and among fans about the way in which the NFL handles misconduct and alleged misconduct by its players. A particularly vivid video of a player striking and apparently knocking his fiancé unconscious called into question the honesty, integrity, and values of the NFL and its leaders – in particular, those of its commissioner. It seemed that this and similar recent events had caught them by surprise, they were not sure what to do or say, and what was said often didn't ring true. The same thing can occur in churches in times of crisis.

The purpose of this article is not to slam the NFL. It is to remind church leaders of a basic truth we often don't grasp: In a time of public crisis, we have one chance to get it right. A corollary to this truth is that, when we don't get it right the first time, things go downhill in a hurry.

Churches are not immune to public crises. They happen all the time. Moral and marriage failures, sexual abuse of children, financial improprieties or failures, angry discharged employees, and congregants making allegations of staff misconduct are all examples of public crises faced by church leaders. The digital age complicates matters by providing a ready outlet for immediate, world-wide public dissemination of anyone's complaint, allegation, or opinion. Leaders must get their arms around a crisis quickly and effectively to address it properly and promptly at the outset, not allowing a bungled response to make matters worse.

Since we are all at risk of such events, what to do when one suddenly arises is something for leaders to talk about. Here is a brief list of topics that might guide the conversation.

- What will we do when someone makes an allegation of misconduct or criminal behavior against a church leader or staff member? Who will look into the allegations?
- Under what circumstances will we relieve a leader of his/her duties pending resolution of charges against him or her?
- What will we tell the congregation? When will we tell them? How much detail? Who will be the spokesperson?
- Who is our church's spokesperson for news media inquiries?

- What will be our response to a leader being arrested for some offense? Innocent until proven guilty, so we continue as usual until a conviction? Do an independent inquiry? Take immediate action just in case the allegations are true?
- If someone in leadership or in our church commits a crime against the church, will we report it to the authorities for prosecution?
- What are our state's laws regarding reporting abuse of children or dependent adults? Who on staff and in leadership is aware of these laws and responsible to follow them?

Just to bring some realism to the conversation, talk about how you would handle the following scenarios were they to occur in your church.

- A high school student returns from camp and two months later alleges a sexual encounter occurred with an adult counsellor or staff member.
  - Subplot twist – this allegation is made 15-years after the event.
- A routine audit reveals that a significant amount of money is missing from the church's bank account.
  - Subplot twist – the church bookkeeper tells the pastor she has been embezzling funds.
- A member of the pastoral staff (or elder in a smaller church) is discovered to have been having an affair for the past year with a married woman in the church.
  - What do we do with the staff member/elder and his family?
  - What do we do with the other family involved?
- A former employee who had been quietly discharged due to quality of work issues initiates an angry digital barrage of criticism of the church and its leaders on Facebook, Twitter, and other social media.

On July 20, 2012, a gunman committed mass murder inside a theater in Aurora, Colorado. I watched Chief Daniel Oates of the Aurora Police Department via television as he interacted with the public and the media for the next several days. I was taken by his candor, thoughtfulness, sincerity, and the accuracy and simplicity of the information he provided. To a great extent, this was his finest hour as a leader. But, his strong leadership in this time of crisis was not a surprise to me. You see, Dan Oates is a friend of mine. And, I knew he had prepared his entire career to effectively lead during times of immense crisis. When his time came to do so, he was ready. He already knew what he would do and the principles that undergirded his actions.

He and his staff had talked a few days before about handling mass-casualty events.

Preparation for a crisis was something to talk about for them, and is something for us to talk about, too.

*Let us know how your conversation goes. Contact Bob Osborne by e-mail at [bob@efcawest.org](mailto:bob@efcawest.org).*