

Something to Talk About – A conversation guide for church leaders

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The Answer Is In the Room

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.

You likely have heard this fable.

A mighty prayer warrior was in the path of an oncoming flood. The news media forecast the grave danger, so the prayer warrior began earnestly pleading for deliverance. A man in a pickup truck came by and offered him a ride to safety, but he decided to keep praying for God's deliverance. As the flood waters rose, a man in a row boat came by and offered to take him to higher ground. He declined and continued to ask for deliverance from God. Finally, as the waters rose above his attic, a helicopter came by and offered to pluck him from his rooftop. Again, the man refused and began pleading ever more earnestly for God's deliverance until the flood waters flowed over his rooftop and swept him to his death.

In heaven, the man asked God why He had not answered his fervent prayers for deliverance. God paused and then answered, "I warned you through the forecast, then, I sent a pickup truck, a rowboat, and a helicopter to save you, but you refused My help – what were you expecting me to do?"

I did not include this fable to mock prayer – it's a mighty gift from God, and our God is a prayer-answering God. I included it to cause us to think about how God answers prayer and, specifically, a certain kind of prayer.

If you have been a church leader for long, I'm sure you've encountered some kind of problem that you were not sure (or perhaps even had no clue) how to handle. I have been there many times. Probably like many of you, I have even prayed the prayer of James 1:5: "But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all men generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him (NASB)." Sometimes, after praying that prayer, the leadership team begins to discuss the problem among themselves, trusting in faith that God would somehow infuse them with wisdom beyond their own at that moment.

Things changed for me when I asked myself this question: “How do I expect God to answer my prayer for wisdom?” You see, I oftentimes behaved as though the answer was in the room – in fact, I and others have used those very words. But what if the answer is not in the room? What if God was answering my prayer in a more ordinary way rather than by supernaturally dumping unlearned wisdom into brains gathered in that room?

Is the answer really in the room? That’s something to talk about.

A question I often ask leaders when they ask my opinion or for a critique about a disastrous decision they made is whether or not they had fairly recently faced that situation before. This is because, if they had not faced this situation before and were not already prepared in advance to handle it, they probably were not very good at handling that type of situation which likely led to the disastrous outcome. Leaders in these situations usually tell me that they prayed fervently about the situation, asking God to provide them wisdom, but they assumed that God would miraculously dump wisdom into their leadership team meeting – that the answer would come from among those in the room. They failed to consider or act upon the idea that God may have already provided the wisdom they requested by preparing in advance someone else to help them, someone who was not already in the room.

The most frequent, useful, and important advice I give to church leaders facing significant problems is to slow down. That’s right – slow down. In times of crisis, quick decisions oftentimes yield undesired collateral damage, and this type of collateral damage is sometimes even more damaging to the church and its leaders than the crisis that led to it. By slowing down our decision-making processes, we give ourselves time to think as well as time to seek guidance and assistance from others. One of the maxims from my career in policing was that, unless there were people who were in immediate danger of death or serious injury (we called it an active assault), it’s better to wait for back up than to quickly go in to handle the crisis alone.

Here are some things to talk about regarding getting answers from outside your own room.

- When you pray the prayer of James 1:5, where do you expect the wisdom you seek to come from? How might God answer this prayer in ways you were not expecting?
- What are some types of significant decisions/crises that might prompt you or your team to invite others into the room to assist in decision-making? Think of all the “bad” things that have happened to churches in recent years. Who might you ask for guidance and assistance?
- Who in your own congregation might be equipped with wisdom in a particular area that you might want to invite into the decision-making processes of your leadership team (counsellors, staff, CPAs, etc.)?
- Who outside your congregation might you consult on significant issues? Think about denominational/association staff, attorneys, insurance agents, etc.
- How can we adopt a leadership culture of “slow down – take a deep breath” when a crisis or significant issue arises?

One of the benefits of being an EFCA church and part of EFCA West is that EFCA church leaders have immediate access to the expertise of the members of the EFCA West team. We urge you to contact any of us, and we will refer you to someone on our team (or perhaps even outside our own “room”) who can

come alongside you as you navigate the problem-solving journey. Never hesitate to call. Helping EFCA churches is what we do. EFCA churches and leaders are not alone.

Church leadership teams oftentimes face situations for which they are unprepared. What strategy do you and your team have to deal with these challenges? Who is on your contacts list that can help you figure things out? Who should be on your contacts list that is not already there?

Is the answer in the room? That's something to talk about.

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