

Something to Talk About – A conversation guide for church leaders

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Emergency Preparedness: Knowing What to Do When Stuff Happens

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

For the past few years, I have again served as an elder and board chairman at my home church. I've been at this church, where a thousand gather for services each Sunday, for 38 years and have served as an elder or in other leadership roles for most of that time. My life work was policing – I spent my life as an emergency first-responder and incident commander. I was pretty confident in my ability to handle emergencies.

Then one Sunday morning, the church fire alarm went off. It makes a nasty, ear-splitting sound. And no one knew what to do. Including me. That became something to talk about.

Church leaders bear responsibility to care for the flock of God, and I believe this includes taking care of them when they are assembled together and something unexpected happens. While bad things don't happen all the time in everyplace, even cursory awareness of current events reminds us that emergencies sometimes happen at churches. Leaders need to know what to do when stuff happens.

Here are two important questions church leadership teams need to answer: Who needs to know what to do when stuff happens? And, what kind of stuff do they need to know about?

Governmental emergency planners expend much time, energy, and expense trying to convince everyone everywhere to be prepared to properly respond to an emergency. However, this has proven to be ineffective as people continue to live in unprepared bliss. Government's "Plan B" strategy is to ensure that first-responders know what to do and that they communicate effectively with those who don't. We can do the same in our churches.

Who in the church needs to know what to do when stuff happens? Here are some people to consider training in handling emergencies.

- Pastors, worship leaders, and other people who have "platform" speaking roles. They are your voice during a time of crisis.
- All staff or, minimally, all staff with ministry leadership responsibilities.
- Church elders and board members.
- Children's and youth workers who might need to shelter or evacuate children.
- Members of the ushering and hospitality teams
- Adult teachers

- Members of the congregation. Have you ever heard of a church having a fire drill?

What kind of stuff should they be prepared to handle? Here are a few potential emergencies to talk about.

- Fire alarms
 - Does your fire alarm generate an automatic response by the fire department? If so, how can we cancel their response?
 - What do we do if an alarm sounds during services, but there is no indication of fire or smoke? Who checks the buildings?
 - Who is authorized to silence an audible alarm, and how do they do it?
 - What do we do if there is visible fire or smoke?
- Building evacuation
 - Who decides when to evacuate the building(s)? What route is to be taken?
 - Where do people go when they evacuate? A specific plan is required for each building.
 - How do we reunite children with parents?
 - Can we evacuate infants and toddlers in the nursery? How?
- Disturbance in the congregation
 - What will we do if someone goes to the platform?
 - What will we do if someone stands among the congregation and begins a rant?
 - When do we call police?
- Natural Disaster (earthquake, tornado, flood, etc.)
 - Building evacuation issues and reuniting families
 - Will we meet when major weather events threaten?
 - Power outage. Do we have emergency lighting and heat? When were they last tested?
- Serious medical issues
 - Care for people in place or assist them out of the venue?
 - Do we have and know how to use a defibrillator?
 - Who contacts and how do we contact emergency medical services?

The fire alarm at my church had sounded because of smoke from burnt popcorn emanating from the youth room. We used that opportunity to learn more about our fire alarm system. A couple of weeks later, we had another “popcorn emergency” that set off the fire alarm. This time, several of us knew how to silence the alarm, contact the alarm monitoring company, and cancel the fire department’s automatic response. We were prepared for that emergency. But other stuff happens, too.

Since that popcorn emergency, we have hired new staff, confirmed new elders, deployed new ushers, and moved our children’s ministry to new classrooms. Emergency preparedness is something for us to talk about again.

Emergency preparedness doesn’t happen by itself and needs frequent updating. It must be intentional and planned, or it won’t happen.

And it’s definitely something to talk about.

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