

Something to Talk About

A conversation guide for church leaders

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Help! I Can't Get Down!

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.

For much of my career in public safety, I responded to mountain rescues. Sometimes, a rescue was required because of a fall or accident that seriously injured the climber. Sometimes it was a hiker who had gotten lost and failed to return home at the designated time. The rescues that intrigued me most, however, were those where a perfectly healthy climber had to be plucked off the mountainside. We mobilized search and rescue teams, tons of equipment, and often performed dramatic helicopter flights to rescue people from the sides of mountains. Why? Because they had encountered an unexpected problem. They had managed to climb up the mountain, but couldn't figure out how to get back down. They were courageous during the climb, but clung to the cliff in terror at the prospect of climbing back down.

I think pastors and church leaders are a lot like climbers. We spend years or perhaps even our entire life climbing the mountains of Christian ministry and, when the time comes to retire, move aside for the next leader, or rotate off the leadership team, we cling to our place on the mountain, terrified at the prospect of coming down.

My EFCA West teammate Brian Farone and I were discussing this recently. I had shared with him my own trepidation at concluding my current six years of service as an elder and being required to take one year off. What will I do? What type of ministry opportunities will I have for exercising my leadership gifts? Will I ever get the opportunity to be returned to the elder tasks that I love to do? Brian mentioned that "climbing down the ladder" is something church leaders need to talk about. And I think he's right.

Most of us are aware of or have experienced a time when a disgruntled pastor or leader, or one who is physically, mentally, emotionally, or spiritually exhausted has completed their term of service, retired, or moved aside from their work. These wounded people need rest, restoration, and help, and they are not the topic of this article. The people I'm writing about are healthy. They could continue to serve. Yet, they have reached the end of an effective term of service, have determined the church or ministry would best be served by a new or next-generation leader, need to scale back to give the young eagles the chance to fly, or otherwise have reached their personal mountain peak and are ready to start their

journey back down. What do we do with these godly, gifted, skilled, mature leaders as they climb down or step aside for others on the mountain? Here are some ideas to jump-start your conversation.

- What have we done in the past with these healthy “former” key leaders? How have we enabled them to serve after their time on the mountain? What has happened to these leaders in the past? Are they still active and involved, or have they faded away from lack of use?
- Who among our current leadership team is facing the prospect of “climbing down” from their current service? Are there areas of service to which we might steer them or prepare them where they can continue to effectively exercise their gifts and skills?
- How do we as individual leaders prepare ourselves for our own inevitable climb down? Have we imagined our own future and are we willing to share our dreams with others?
- How should we leverage the wisdom and maturity of “former” elders and pastors to the benefit of our current leadership team? How will we turn any of our good intentions regarding this into reality?
- How can we broach this subject and give leaders about to start the “climb down” phase of their journey opportunities to share their hopes and dreams about their future service?
- Are there any leaders in our church family to whom we owe an apology for not caring for them during this part of their leadership journey? How might we make things right for them?

I believe there are three components of our church leadership journey that dictate our legacy. They are what we did during the years we led, how well and willingly we passed the leadership baton, and how we climbed back down. What people seem to remember most is how we finished. Let’s help one another finish well. It’s not enough to climb the mountain – we need to figure out how to safely get back down, too. And that’s something to talk about.

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