

# Something to Talk About

## A conversation guide for church leaders

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### What do we look like?

*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](http://www.efcawest.org). Click on the Church Leadership tab to get to the archive.

This month's topic may make us a little uncomfortable. I know because I'm a little uncomfortable bringing it up.

I've never tried to boil a frog, and I don't suggest you do it either. There is an urban legend that says that a frog placed into a pot of room temperature water will not try to get out if the water is heated slowly enough – the temperature change will be so gradual that the frog won't notice it, and it will sit there and allow itself to slowly cook until it dies.

Our all-knowing friends at Wikipedia debunk this idea noting that a frog will leave when the water gets too hot if it has a means to do so. Nonetheless, I won't allow this inconvenient truth to ruin a good illustration.

My premise is this: If we as church leaders don't pay attention to gradual changes in the congregation and in our community, if we don't intentionally have and use effective tools to monitor these changes, we will generally be surprised when we finally discover them later – when they are too obvious to simply ignore. Let me give an example.

In recent years, I have visited many churches. One of the things I do upon arrival is look around. What I usually look at, unless the facility is in dangerous disrepair or is particularly "unique," are the people who are there. Often, because I am an outsider, I also notice the people who are not there. I suspect the church's leaders likely did not notice who is not there either, at least until it became painfully obvious. And that's something to talk about.

I was chatting with friends the other day about the rapid demographic changes in our country. This is often especially apparent in some major population centers (both urban and suburban), but also happens in more rural areas, too. I suspect that many of us who are "older" leaders in our churches assumed in times past that, as we grew older, our churches would be replenished by people who looked a lot like us. I don't think many of us thought that there would be as many changes in the economic conditions and demographics of the neighborhoods that surround our church facilities. Multi-ethnicity

was simply not as important to most in my generation as it is to younger adults today who desire their church family to resemble the neighborhood in which they live and work. Then, one day, we notice. Our congregation, which looked like our community back in the day, no longer looks like our community. Oftentimes the changes have been so gradual that leaders just have not noticed it until they are startled to realize that we are no longer reaching our community, and we may have skipped a generation or two in passing on the ministry of the church. The tragic end for such a church is typically a painful season of irrelevance and then death. It's sad, and none of us want that for our churches. But are we doing anything about it?

Here are some things to talk about that can help us notice these often subtle changes and address them before it's too late so that we can continue to be God's salt and light in the communities where He has planted us.

- What are the demographics of our congregation and those of the surrounding neighborhoods? Use real data – avoid vagaries such as “we’ve gotten older” or “the neighborhood has changed.” Use actual numbers and categories and reliable data.
- What are any obvious disparities between what our congregation looks like and what our community looks like? This is the difference between the people we see and the people we don't see in our churches. Why might these disparities exist?
- How disparate will the demographics of our church and our community need to become before we decide to be intentional in doing something about it?
- What scares us about the changes around us? What excites us about the changes around us? How might some of our perceived threats be turned into opportunities?
- How might we minister to people unlike ourselves and attract them to Christ and the church?
- What are some other areas of potential “drift” that we should intentionally monitor? Much is written about mission and theological drift. Are there other types of drift that imperil our ministry? How can we guard them to prevent drift?

Gradual change that is known intentional is usually positive – I like to call it adaptation. Gradual change that is unintentional is usually not so positive – I like to call it drift. Intentional change should keep us on mission. Unintentional change knocks us off target.

What do we look like? Who are we not seeing in our church? Are we adapting to the changes around us or drifting off target? That's something to talk about.

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