

Something to Talk About

A conversation guide for church leaders

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Emergency Preparedness

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 <https://efcawest.efcadistrict.org/church-leadership/> or <https://efcawest.efcadistrict.org/something-to-talk-about-archives/>.

If you are at all like me, when I hear the phrase “emergency preparedness” my mind conjures up all kinds of emergency situations, everything from fires to flood to earthquakes (yep, I’m a California guy) to violence to child or sexual abuse allegations. Yes, there is no end to the potential emergencies that I can imagine.

And that is the problem. When we think of emergency preparedness, our minds tend to go directly to emergencies and disasters. Yet, the key concept of emergency preparedness is not the word “emergency,” it’s the word “*preparedness*.”

What does preparedness look like? More specifically, as it relates to the congregations we serve, what does preparedness look like *for us in this place*? Because leaders of organizations are responsible for the care and safety of those they lead, our emergency preparedness is something to talk about.

“Be prepared” has been the scouting motto for many years. They talk of being prepared in mind by having thought out beforehand any accident or situation that might occur, so that one knows the right thing to do at the right moment and is also willing to do it. Knowing what needs to be done and being willing and able to do it when it needs to be done is the essence of emergency preparedness.

There are an unlimited number of potential emergencies that might befall our churches so it makes no sense for church leaders to prepare for everything. But we should be prepared for some things. There are two main types of emergencies I believe we should prepare for. The first includes emergencies that are likely to occur. Since I serve in Southern California, we should be prepared to deal with earthquakes. Since we have people in attendance, we should be prepared for medical emergencies. And there are certainly other predictable emergencies. The second type of emergency I believe we should prepare for

are those that are highly unlikely, but everyone thinks we should be prepared for them anyway. I put church shootings into this category. They are highly unlikely to occur at any particular church; but, when they do happen, everyone thinks that some kind of plan should have been in place.

Here are some ideas to help start your conversation.

- Make a list of the two types of emergencies – those that happen fairly frequently in churches and those that are generally unlikely to occur. At a minimum, I suggest churches have some plans related to fire/explosion, building evacuation (remember infants in the nursery), any natural disasters that are common to your location, medical emergencies, worship service disruptions or someone charging to the platform, acts of violence, and allegations of child abuse or sexual misconduct.
- For each of the items on the list, visualize and talk about what it might look like to be prepared for such an emergency rather than focusing on the type of emergency itself. For instance, in a fire emergency, rather than focusing upon the fire, talk about what our building evacuation, fire department response, and any actions to contain or quench the fire would look like if we were prepared for it. When we use candles, are we prepared to put out a fire? Talk about the actions we would need to take were that emergency to occur. Take notes to help create preparedness plans later.
- If we currently do not have emergency preparedness plans, consider addressing one or two each month rather than taking on the entire list at once. If we already have them, how often do we review them? Do the people in our congregations know what to do?
- Remember that preparedness includes recovery after the event itself is over. For instance, after a successful fire evacuation, where might we hold next week's services if our fire-damaged facility is not available?
- Write your emergency preparedness (and response) plan for one emergency at a time. Trying to do all at once can be frustrating, feel like an insurmountable task, and delay being prepared for the other emergencies until the last one is addressed.
- Who should be aware of our preparedness plans? Pastors, staff, maintenance personnel, elders, key volunteer leaders, children's workers? How will we train them? Remember – it is better to have a simple plan that is easily understood and implemented than a complex and comprehensive plan that we lack the capacity to understand fully and implement.
- Put onto our church calendar specific times to review and refresh our preparedness plans. A book on the shelf is not helpful during an emergency if we are not already familiar with its contents.

Remember those safety briefings flight attendants give before takeoff – especially the part where we should secure our own oxygen mask prior to helping those around us? In that light, consider the following.

- What preparations might we make to assist others in our community when an emergency occurs?

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- Can we have agreements with other churches to host their congregations should their facilities become unusable? Can we partner with schools or other groups, at least in the short-term?
- Can we partner with city or regional emergency planners to make our facilities and members available for emergency shelter, feeding, etc. in the event of a community emergency?

Few of us enjoy talking about disasters and emergencies. Yet they occur somewhere every day. Those who wear the mantle of leadership also carry the responsibility to ensure reasonable preparedness for these things. Leaders need to know the right thing to do at the right moment and have the willingness and courage to do it. Emergency preparedness is something to talk about.

Let us know if we can help and how your conversation goes.

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