

Something to Talk About

A conversation guide for church leaders

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Loving Is Harder Than Leading

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.

I have the great privilege of spending a lot of my time interacting with pastors and church leaders. A very common theme is how difficult it can be to be a church leader. And it is difficult. But something I have learned through many of these conversations, and at times in my own leadership journey, is how difficult it can be to be a church lover. In fact, I think most of us would have to admit that loving is harder than leading. And that's something to talk about.

Leadership is hard, and I think it can be harder to lead well in a church environment than in many others where leadership is rooted in positional power rather than in servanthood. While leadership training historically has not been prevalent in seminary training, there now is a plethora of books, seminars and conferences related to leading churches. In fact, there are so many leadership books and models out there that it can be hard to figure out a template that works long-term for you.

Not so much with loving.

Leading churches would be easy if it weren't for..., well, people. They whine, complain, passively-aggressively resist, gossip, drag their feet, quietly withhold offerings, air complaints just before the worship service, hold grudges, demonstrate distrust, and assume the worst about our actions. People are frustrating! And, we get frustrated, and sometimes angry. Yet, I think most of us would have to admit that "those people" are just like us – humans who are subject to the intellectual, emotional and relational frailties that come from our fallen world.

If church leaders are not careful, we can fall prey to one of the natural outcomes of accumulated frustrations from trying to lead God's people – we can stop loving them. Those

reading this article have no need of a treatise on loving one another and our neighbors. Yet, sometimes it is hard to practice that which we know to be true. If we are not careful, we can come to see people we are called to love as impediments to our achieving our expectations, strategies, dreams, and God's call for our lives. We long for the good sheep that we want in our flock to replace the sheep that we currently have. As my pastor brother warns, we can get to the point where we sin by using the sheep we have to get the sheep we want.

How do we lead effectively while loving the people already in our care? Here are some suggestions for starting your team's conversation.

- Clarity in our dreams and aspirations is helpful and empowering. Understanding and unity within our team are helpful, too. Consider sharing a couple of your ministry or life dreams and aspirations with your leadership team, and have team members do likewise. Whether our dreams are quite similar or disparate, getting them out in the open with one another as part of a relaxed conversation rather than as part of a decision we need to make helps us understand one another as well as identify areas where differences might arise down the road.
- Share with one another some examples of resistance to our leadership in the church. What did it feel like to us? What assumptions did we make about their motives in resisting? Might those assumptions have been wrong?
- In our service as leaders, what congregant behaviors trigger frustration and/or anger in us? How do we deal with the frustration and anger? Has the way we deal with it yielded the results we want? If not, what do we need to do differently?
- Discuss any recent leadership initiatives that resulted in broken relationships within your congregation. What was the nature of the conflict, and what might have been done differently to mitigate or prevent it?
- It's been my experience that most broken relationships between church leaders and congregants stem from unmet expectations, especially unmet expectations related to changes in programs or practices within the church. Has that been your experience? If so, what might we do to clarify expectations so as to prevent damage to relationships?

A couple of weeks ago I was chatting with my pastor about some relational conflicts at our church. "Everything goes nicely until someone tries to lead," he said. How true. But the answer is not to maintain peace by not leading; it is to lead well and with understanding. We need to continuously grow in our leadership knowledge and skills as well as in our love and understanding for those we serve by leading. How are we doing? How are we growing? What have we learned about leading from the relational traumas of the past? For those of us called to lead God's people and to love them well, that's something to talk about.

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