

Something to Talk About

A conversation guide for church leaders

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Invisible People

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/>.

In recent years, I have discovered long-distance train travel in the United States, and I enjoy it. Admittedly, travel by train is not fast and it's not for everyone. But I have enjoyed every train trip I have ever taken. I also fly a lot – thankfully, not as much as some, but more than most. And I have noticed there are some very real differences between train and air travel.

On a train, the pace is slower and people talk to one another. As a solo traveler, I meet up to three people three times each day as I sit at a table for four in the dining car – and we talk. I spend time in the observation car with other people – and we talk. Over the course of a day or two, we get to know one another – at least a little bit. On an airplane, however, people are crowded together, hurried and harried, and people don't talk to one another – certainly not to strangers. We put on headphones, or open books or e-readers, or lean back (barely!) and sleep – or pretend to sleep so as to not be bothered noticing or interacting with those around us. We sit together in intimate proximity, rubbing legs, arms, and at times hips and thighs with total strangers that we ignore for hours at a time. We often act like others are invisible.

Are there people in our midst in and around our churches that are invisible to us, whether intentionally or unintentionally? People we just don't see or look right past? In every conversation I've had with others on this topic, the answer, either immediately or after some reflection, is a resounding, "Yes!" More often than not, the most invisible people in a church context are people with disabilities. For church leaders, identifying and actually seeing these invisible people among and around us is something to talk about.

To help jump-start your conversation, here are some things you may want to talk about.

- Are there people in our congregation with physical or developmental disabilities? Who are they and what is their disability? Using one's name decreases invisibility

- Have I ever had a conversation with a physically disabled person about their disability in order to understand and minister to them better? If yes, what was learned and was it worth it? If no, why not and should you?
- At my own church, we have people who are blind, developmentally disabled, and suffer from medical issues such as seizures. We also have people who, whether temporarily or permanently, use assistive devices such as canes, crutches, walkers, wheelchairs and scooters. What is it like for these people to attend our church, and how might we make things better? What is access like for balance-challenged or limited mobility senior citizens?
- When a person with a disability comes to our church, do they find us welcoming, encouraging and helpful or do we come across as bothered or befuddled when we try to accommodate their needs?
- What types of disabilities would make it difficult for someone to attend your church? Make a list of the disabilities and the barriers to be overcome.
- What if any training has been provided to our staff and leaders related to people with disabilities?
- Do I give people with disabilities a perfunctory “hello” and move on, or do I stop and invest time with them?
- Are we aware of people with disabilities that have not or no longer attend our church perhaps because of a disability? What might we do to help?
- Are walkways and entrances suitable for those who are mobility impaired clearly marked? If a disabled guest showed up for services, could they figure out how to gain entry without feeling stupid or that they are creating problems?
- Do we intentionally provide opportunities for members with disabilities to exercise their spiritual gifts?

I do not write this month's article with any pride or smugness. I was disappointed with myself as I composed these questions. It's my prayer that you, if needed, will share in my disappointment and that we can provoke one another to love and good deeds in ministering to those who are so often “invisible people.”

For more information on this topic, contact Alex Rivero, EFCA West's director of all people ministries at alex.rivero@efca.org.

I found the information at <http://www.disabilitiesandfaith.org/> to be quite interesting and informative.

*Let us know if we can help and how your conversation goes.
Contact Bob Osborne by e-mail at bob.osborne@efca.org.*