

Something to Talk About

A conversation guide for church leaders

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Collateral Damage – How’s the Family?

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/>.

Throughout my career in policing, I had to be concerned about collateral damage. Collateral damage is harm done to someone or something because of action taken to accomplish something else. It is often unintentional, but oftentimes predictable. In serving a search warrant, damage to doorways and other parts of the location to be searched would be collateral damage. In a riot, the effects of tear gas on uninvolved people would be collateral damage. When someone is arrested and jailed, their family and loved ones experience collateral damage such as loss of income and fractured relationships.

I have found that church leaders’ families oftentimes suffer collateral damage because of our ministry of church leadership. This may be the result of actions by people inside or outside of the congregation, but it is also frequently the result of the church leader’s own actions or inattention while pursuing their ministry. Far too often I have heard accounts of spouses and children of church leaders who have been victimized, even traumatized, by their ministry spouse’s church leadership work – whether paid or volunteer.

I find it interesting that Paul, when addressing the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:28, told these church leaders to “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood” (ESV). It was not just the members of the flock that needed the elders’ attention and care – they were to pay attention and care for themselves, too. Since we are commanded to pay attention to ourselves, I assume we should pay attention to our families, too. Collateral damage is something to talk about.

Most of the pastors and church leaders I know (including me) seldom if ever have a significant conversation with other leaders’ spouses or children. When we do, it is usually a perfunctory greeting as we pass by and the reply is the generally unhelpful universal reply, “Fine.” This cannot qualify as paying attention or caring. How might church leaders protect one another by caring for and paying attention to the leadership team’s families? Let me provide some suggestions to get your conversation going.

- Has our leadership team decided we have a responsibility to pay attention and to care for one another's families? Are we currently doing so in an effective manner? Should something change?
- Ask your spouse (and children if old enough) whether anyone from the church (specifically the leadership team) ever talks with them or asks how they are doing? You'll likely be surprised by the answer.
- Have you ever asked your spouse or children how they feel about your ministry? Ask them.
- Do our spouses and children know that other leaders are expected to pay attention to and care for them?
- Do we have a plan to deal with people in the church who treat leaders' family members in an ungodly way? What is it? Have we ever implemented it?
- Have a leadership team meeting where we set aside significant time to share with one another what is happening with our family members and how we as leaders seek to care for them in light of the pressures they deal with due to our ministry. Do this periodically. – put it on the calendar and agenda. Treat this conversation with utmost confidentiality.
- Do something fun with the leadership team and spouses once or twice a year. It doesn't need to be fancy or expensive – just an opportunity to be together and get to know one another. Be sure this isn't something that leaves out unmarried leaders. If you have lots of children, consider child care (at least some of the time) so parents can focus upon adult conversations rather than watching their children.
- Discuss what you might do should a leader suspect that all is not well in another leader's family. How should we have that conversation?
- When you pray together, include prayer for one another's families – be specific about what we are asking God to do in their lives.

This article is very real for me. As a young church leader, barely 30 years old, I had become so focused upon my work in the Sheriff's Department and my leadership ministry at my church, that I was neglecting my wife – yes, a toddler and infant were involved, too. When a co-leader asked her how she was doing one Sunday morning, she broke into tears – she had become collateral damage in my pursuit of ministry and service to others. After a very uncomfortable evening being chewed out by a more senior leader and mentor and his wife, I understood my shortcomings. I was able to address them before I unwittingly destroyed my family. I thank God that someone paid attention to my wife and cared enough for her to ask that question and to take the necessary action they found all was not "fine." Someone cared enough for me and the church to ask my wife, "How's it going?" We should do no less.

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