

Something to Talk About

A conversation guide for church leaders

By Bob Osborne, EFCA West
Director of Church Health
(bob.osborne@efca.org)

April 1, 2018

The Leader's Role

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/>.

“The leader's role is to define reality, then give hope.”

When one writes for an audience of church leaders, beginning an article on leadership with a quote attributed to Napoleon Bonaparte instead of a Bible verse might be dangerous, but I decided to take that risk.

In my work with church leaders, I have been struck by two things that occur frequently enough for me to consider them a trend. First, is how often members within a church leadership team offer significantly different opinions regarding what is occurring in the church and why it is occurring. The second is how often church leadership teams admit that they never (or virtually never) invest any time trying to clearly define the realities they are facing. Both of these can cause significant problems for leaders and the congregations they serve, especially during times of crisis, conflict or confusion. For church leaders, defining reality is something to talk about.

In today's era of hyperbole, data distortion, highly-partisan argumentation, and using violence and personal attacks to defeat or drown out those whose ideas we disagree with, Christian leaders don't have many readily available examples of how to effectively work together to define the realities facing the congregations we lead. I believe Tom Paterson, founder of the Paterson Center and the popular Life Plan and StratOp processes, is on point when he stresses “perspective before planning.” Oftentimes, in our rush to do something about a problem, we don't take the time necessary to develop a sound perspective of what it is that we are actually facing so our plans, based upon inaccurate assumptions, fail.

We often find ourselves addressing symptoms rather than actual ailments. We think we have a governance systems problem but what is actually occurring is unreconciled personal disagreements and sinful behaviors among leaders. We think we are facing a closed-to-the-gospel community but what we actually face is a church that stresses learning about God over doing what He has commanded us to do. We think we are facing congregants that lack zeal in their faith, but what we actually face are young families whose culture bears little resemblance to that of our younger years. We think that younger people are just not interested in the local church anymore but are actually facing the consequences of not reaching out and empowering the generation that follows us.

To navigate anywhere, the most important spot on the map is the “you are here” spot. If we do not have a good read on our “you are here” spot, we cannot guide ourselves to our desired destination. We know it’s “out there,” but cannot get to it. Knowing where we truly are and what we are actually facing is what I mean by “defining reality.” It’s not making something up, sugar-coating the impending disaster, or telling those we lead what we wish our reality was; it’s just truth-seeking and truth-telling.

So, how are you and your team doing in defining reality? I must confess that many of the teams I have served with have not done this well, and we have paid consequences for those failures. Here are some questions to jumpstart your conversation.

- What tools are available to us, and which of them are we using, to determine how things are going? Do we discuss these measures to come to agreement upon what they mean, or is each team member left to come to their own conclusions?
- Do our measurement tools actually measure what we think they measure? For example, if five years ago, the average weekly attendance was 150 and currently the average weekly attendance is still 150, we might conclude that the church is not growing and has become stagnant. However, if five years ago people came to church three of four Sundays, those 150 people per week equated to 200 people who attended our church ($200 \times 0.75 = 150$). If today people come to church two of four Sundays, although weekly attendance is still 150 people per week, we actually would have 300 people who attend our church ($300 \times 0.50 = 150$). Our church has grown by 33% even though our average weekly attendance remains the same. The real issue we face related to attendance is that, although those who attend services have increased by 33%, people are attending less frequently.
- What do we wish we measured but currently do not?
- When our team faces a real or potential problem, do we tend to invest time at the beginning of our conversation to gain perspective about the problem (define reality) or do we jump directly into making plans or taking actions? Recall some recent issues faced by our team – what steps did we take in addressing them? Did those steps include time for gaining perspective?
- When we share issues with our congregation, do we clearly and accurately define reality? Do we “sugarcoat” issues to make them more palatable?

The second part of Napoleon's statement involves hope. I am struck by the order – first define reality, then give hope. As Christians, our hope is obviously rooted in Jesus Christ – He is our hope. As leaders, how do we communicate this? When speaking words of hope to our congregations, do we start by defining reality? As leaders, when dealing with the more mundane issues of congregational life, do we move beyond the diagnosing of problems faced by the sheep under our care to giving them hope?

I'm highly analytical by nature. I sometimes catch myself working hard to define realities but then I do not take the next step of giving hope. I need to bring my interactions with the people under my care to a place of giving hope, not by ignoring the realities, but by defining reality and intentionally moving to a place of giving hope. That's my takeaway. What's yours?

In Numbers 13, at God's command, Moses sent out the 12 spies to check out the Promised Land. They came back with an accurate report of a land flowing with milk and honey, filled with wonderful fruit, and occupied by very strong and very large people. They accurately described the reality. They faltered, however, in giving hope. Caleb's hopeful report demonstrated confidence in God's strength to overcome the obstacles. The report of ten others, however, offered no hope. "We are not able to go up against the people, for they are too strong for us" (Numbers 13:31, NASB). Their assessment was real – the inhabitants were too strong for Israel; but, they were not too strong for God. May we as church leaders exercise wisdom and discernment in defining reality and put our strength in our Lord, not in ourselves, in offering hope to those we are blessed to lead. Our hope in Christ Jesus, both now and in eternity, indeed is something to talk about.

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

Contact Bob Osborne by e-mail at bob.osborne@efca.org.