

# Something to Talk About

## A conversation guide for church leaders

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### Speaking in Tongues

*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](http://www.efcawest.org). Click on the Church Leadership tab to get to the archive.

This article isn't about what you might think. It is about speaking in tongues, but not that kind of speaking in tongues. I'm writing about Genesis 11 tongues, God's solution for mankind's failure to obey His command to disperse and populate the earth.

*"Come, let Us go down there and confuse their language so that they will not understand one another's speech." So from there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth... (Genesis 11:7-8, ESV)*

The scattering process has been successful, the earth has been populated, and the confusion of multiple languages remains. Today, our neighborhoods are often characterized by diverse populations that speak in different tongues. Language differences impact churches that seek to introduce people from multi-lingual communities to Jesus Christ and His saving grace. How can we bring the gospel to the people around us who do not speak our language? For church leaders in today's world, speaking in tongues is something to talk about.

I have written from the perspective of an English-language congregation working with people with no or limited English-language proficiency because that is currently the most common example we see in United States. I believe the issues we face apply generally to any host church and language-specific ministry whether Spanish, Tagalog, Mandarin, Cantonese, Korean, Farsi, Swahili or any other.

It is important in any endeavor to start with the end in mind. One of my favorite philosophers, Baseball Hall of Famer Yogi Berra, is quoted as saying, "If you don't know where you are going, you'll end up someplace else." It has been the experience of the EFCA West team that churches that have run into troubles with language-specific ministries often did not start with the end in mind. They started with good intentions and some clear first steps, but had not adequately clarified the desired outcomes.

Churches that seek to reach a language-specific group in their community generally find themselves on a journey that starts with a fork in the road. The first question to be addressed is what kind of language-specific ministry are we trying to create – are we seeking to plant what is to become an autonomous language-specific congregation, or are we trying to create a language-specific ministry that will remain within our current church family? If the answer to this question is to plant an autonomous language-

specific congregation, the planting church needs to set out to build a church that will have its own leadership, make its own decisions and become a separate entity from the host church. This process progresses from birth, through developmental growth and maturity, and finds its zenith in fully-functional autonomy for the new congregation. It is a church-planting ministry that should be done using sound church planting strategies.

The second option requires a different approach. Among EFCA West churches, this is the more common approach to embarking upon language-specific ministry. It creates a language-specific ministry within the host congregation. Churches that choose this approach will find that their language-specific congregation will likely move through four predictable stages of development.

In stage one, the church starts a language-specific outreach or missionary endeavor, and a group of people reached through this effort begins meeting together. It often feels like a class or small group.

In stage two, after the initial missionary endeavor takes hold, these groups often develop into what can be characterized as a department within the host church's overall ministry. It becomes much like other departments or ministries such as the student ministry, children's ministry, senior ministries and others. It often enjoys a higher degree of autonomy than other ministries, likely because the host congregation has difficulty communicating in their language. This inadvertent autonomy can create a feeling of separation from the host church and eventually can result in conflict.

In stage three, the language-specific department has continued to grow, and host churches often begin referring to them as a congregation, differentiating between their English- and other-language congregations and worship services. In this stage, language-specific congregations can grow significantly, sometimes as large as or even larger than the host congregation.

Over time, it is common for members of a healthy and growing language –specific congregation to desire to become fully integrated into the ministries of the church. They no longer want to be a special congregation separated from the majority of the church because of language; rather, they want to be part of the church family that happens to speak a different language. This is a subtle difference, but in people's emotions it is very real. A stage four congregation has become fully integrated into the host church, language differences notwithstanding.

We have found that language-specific congregations often stop growing and actually begin to decline when they become stalled somewhere in this journey and fail to move to the next stage. Those in the language-specific congregation begin to feel like they are not really a part of the church. They come to feel they are viewed by others as "those people," and they become frustrated because they feel unable to become fully a part of the host church – they feel stuck in an us/them relationship. They can come to feel like second-class members of the church, not only isolated by their language differences, but also by the structures and systems and expectations within their own church.

Embarking upon and growing a healthy language-specific ministry is difficult work and, pardon the pun, foreign to most of us. There is little training for this, and we often move forward based upon some book we read, some Internet research, and a lot of flying by the seat of our pants. Here are some questions that might stimulate your leadership team's conversations about language-specific ministry within your own church.

1. What are the people-groups and languages spoken in the communities that surround our church? If you are an established church with facilities in a neighborhood that has “changed,” have you become a commuter church where most of your congregation drives through the surrounding community but does not live there? Who among the congregation has relationships with these people-groups?
2. Do we have an opportunity to minister to one or more of these language groups? Brainstorm ideas on how we might do this. How can we build relational bridges?
3. Who do we know that could provide insight and knowledge for our leaders as we consider this type of ministry? Here are some contacts you should know.
  - a. Alex Rivero ([alex.rivero@efca.org](mailto:alex.rivero@efca.org)) and Ruben Navarrete ([ruben.navarrete@efca.org](mailto:ruben.navarrete@efca.org)) serve as EFCA West’s Hispanic ministry directors and are available to consult with churches on this topic.
  - b. Contact Alex Rivero ([alex.rivero@efca.org](mailto:alex.rivero@efca.org)) to obtain a copy of his *10 Questions about Hispanic Church Planting*, a helpful guide to asking the right questions.
  - c. Contact us at [EFCAWest@EFCA.org](mailto:EFCAWest@EFCA.org) if you would like assistance to connect with people who can assist you with ministries to other language-specific or ethnic groups.
4. What is our strategy for integrating the English-speaking children of non-English-speaking people into age-specific and other ministries of the church?
5. What cultural differences impact language-specific ministries? For example, might people from high-respect and high-community cultures find it difficult to integrate their cultural paradigms with the stereotypically individualistic and more debate-oriented American culture? In what ways might these differences impact conversations about how we handle finances, how we use and care for church space, and how we integrate people into existing church leadership structures? How can we bridge these culture-based relationship and communication gaps? How can we ensure that all voices are heard and understood?
6. Has our language-specific congregation stalled in its growth and development? If so, where is it along the four stages of development, and what might be hindering it from moving to the next step? If not, what is the next stage and how might we as leaders do to facilitate the successful transition to the next stage of ministry development?
7. Does your vision for language-specific ministry lead to full integration within the church? If not, why not? Do you have some other end in mind? How might you lead toward full integration while maintaining the identity and language of the other cultures within the church family?

Beginning a language-specific ministry that will grow and thrive over the long term is much more complex than just finding someone who can teach in another language. There is a high level of intentionality required of us leaders to create the structures and environments that allow those who speak a language different from our own to thrive in our midst and, ultimately, alongside us as truly integrated members of our church family. The confounding of languages in Genesis 11 presents challenges for us but need not keep us from making disciples of people of other tongues. We need to keep in mind the “all people” nature of the Great Commission and be able to see the “all peoples” living and working around us. That’s something to talk about, in whatever language you use.

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