

Something to Talk About

A conversation guide for church leaders

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Decision Making in Angry, Polarized Times

In case you missed it, people are angry. People are polarized. And it's hard to lead angry, polarized people into unity about most anything.

There have been two great, overlapping upheavals in our world and in our churches in recent weeks. What to do about COVID19 was hard enough, and then came the issues and associated with the needless death of George Floyd at the hands of police and its aftermath. While leaders need to lead well in times of calm, they also need to lead well in their first responses disruptive, contentious, and tumultuous issues in our communities both in their immediate aftermath and into the future.

Should we gather together in our church buildings or should we practice physical distancing? Is COVID19 a real threat to humanity or is it some kind of worldwide political plot to undermine an opposing political party? Do I participate in demonstrations against racism or stay home and be quiet? Do I like that tweet or Facebook post or offer a differing perspective or just keep my fingers off the keyboard? Do we pause in our sermon series to speak to issues of racism or keep plugging through our current series as though nothing has happened? These are all choices that church leaders have been working through over the past few months and congregants offer strongly different outlooks, recommendations and even demands to follow their wants an opinions on these topics because, well, I'm right and anyone that can't see that my way is right is either uninformed, stupid, or in cahoots with the enemies of God. It seems that whatever strategy or direction church leaders decide, one third of the church will agree, one third will disagree, and one third will keep their thoughts to themselves.

How church leaders make decisions in angry, polarized times is something to talk about. Let me suggest some decision-making thoughts and philosophies for your consideration and some questions about them for you and your fellow leaders to discuss as you start your own conversations.

- **Recognize that leaders need to be strong and courageous – but not closed-minded and stubborn.** How comfortable is our team with adjusting our current strategies and decisions as times and circumstances change? How much contrary or new information would be required to convince us to reconsider a decision? Have we thoughtfully considered other

points of view and constructive inputs of those who are aligned with our mission yet see things differently? Are we free to discuss our own differing thoughts and opinions during our leadership meetings or are we afraid such discussions will lead to disunity? Look at the context and reasons behind God's encouragement to Joshua to be "strong and courageous." What was he to be strong and courageous about, and what was the source of the strength and courage he needed to do so? Why and about what was he told to be very courageous (the only time the word "very" was used)?

- ***Hold ourselves accountable to make difficult decisions based upon Kingdom values rather than political solutions.*** Kingdom values include things like loving our neighbor, sharing the gospel, making disciples, justice, mercy, grace, fruit of the Spirit, peacemaking, mourning and rejoicing at the appropriate time, humility, submission to others, putting other's needs before our own, asking God to search our hearts to point out any wicked ways that may have crept in unnoticed and doing so with strength, courage and conviction. Political solutions tend to be predictable party-line proposals or slogans that are in opposition to the other party's proposals. We get the one from scripture and the other from elsewhere.

When we are making decisions on topics about which people are angry and polarized, what do we do to keep our eyes on the cross and on Kingdom values? Do we take the time to consider and label potential strategies as based Kingdom values? When we talk about or share with the congregation the decisions we make do we do so using the language of Kingdom values? Take a look at the way we communicated our COVID19 decisions – were we clear in defining them in kingdom values? If we are going to have conflict, let's have conflict over how to best live out Kingdom values.

[For example: If we communicated that we decided to gather contrary to government orders/regulations that prohibit doing so because we believe we have a First Amendment right to do so, we have made that decision based upon a political value, not a Kingdom value. If we make the same decision based upon our scriptural understanding that obeying those restrictions would cause us to sin against God, then we have made that decision based upon a Kingdom value. Same decision, different values.]

- ***Shun slogans, political rhetoric and angry words.*** "...for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God." (James 1:20 ESV) What strategies do we have in place to protect us from making decisions when we are angry? Do we allow the anger of others to impact our decisions? When we discuss issues, do we communicate slogans, political rhetoric and angry words without labeling them as such and/or give them equal weight to Kingdom values and more nuanced concepts? Slogans and political rhetoric abound (just watch the news, news feeds, social media, etc.). They are simplistic ideas that offer simplistic solutions to complex problems. When making and communicating decisions, church leaders should avoid them. In difficult times, be thoughtful, not clever.

July 1, 2020

- ***The discussion is more important than the decision.*** It is out of robust, thoughtful discussion/conversation that good decisions are made. It has been my experience that most “bad” decisions came with very little substantive discussion. It is a natural tendency for busy leaders to want to come to a decision quickly, so oftentimes we get frustrated when a conversation goes “too long.” The more “Type A” the leader, the more frustrating the discussion. How would you and your co-leaders rate the quality of the discussions you have before deciding important issues? Individually, give it a score from one to ten, and then discuss your ratings with one another and why each person gave it. Do our meeting procedures (including parliamentary rules) facilitate or stifle robust, thoughtful discussion or result in the making of speeches?
- ***We won't grow if we won't listen.*** When making significant decisions, especially when I have reached my opinion quickly, I try to carefully listen to the other side with an ear to learn from what is being said. Sometimes, it takes some time. It may not change my decision, but it helps me grow either more firmly resolved that the decision is correct or to hold my viewpoint more humbly or to change it altogether. All three are good outcomes. Rarely do I listen to another's viewpoint without learning something of value (for me, listening seldom includes being yelled at or demeaned, though even that is a learning experience). What do you and your teams do to ensure that you understand as many viewpoints about a topic or pending decision as possible before coming to a decision?

These are extraordinary times and the decisions we make impact other people's lives and the Kingdom work God has given to us. Let's do the work and create the systems needed to ensure that we decide those issues well. How we make decisions 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.

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/>.