

Something to Talk About

A conversation guide for church leaders

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It May Be Harder to Return Than It Was to Stop

I'm not a betting man; but, if I was, I would bet on this: For many churches, it will be harder to return post-COVID than it was to stop or slow down¹. It takes more energy to create or gain momentum that it takes to maintain it. A year ago, there were quick and compelling reasons to curtail or eliminate in-person church gatherings – there were fairly quick decisions to be made and technologies to be utilized to mitigate the loss or in-person gatherings. Regathering will likely be more nuanced and will take more time and will require more decisions to be made that have longer-term impacts. And did I mention that most of us have over a year's worth of frazzled emotions, relational and political conflict, family issues and, for leaders, a sense of exhaustion or at least fatigue – both physically and spiritually? We, and those we serve through our leadership, have had over a year to think and dream about regathering and to create our individual expectations. And such expectations are oftentimes unrealized.

I remember when the church I attend began meeting outdoors after several months of only on-line services. It was good to be together again, at least for those of us that came, but it definitely was not as joyful or fulfilling emotionally as gathering together used to be. We are now meeting indoors, too, with diminished and socially distanced seating capacity and wearing masks and, no, it's not like it used to be. Do we have realistic expectations for corporate worship in the coming months as the COVID curtailments begin to thaw? Or will we experience a sense of disappointment that we need to prepare for, as was felt by many of the older Israelite priests and Levites returning from captivity that wept over the difference between the rebuilt temple and their recollection of the glory of the original temple that had been destroyed 50 years before?² Will we and those we lead be joyful or weeping –likely, we'll be doing both.

As our churches begin the regathering process, let me suggest that we leaders talk about some of the emotions that we and our congregations will likely experience. In this article, we will consider four of these emotions, and you and your team may discern others as well. However many, the emotions involved in regathering are something to talk about.

¹¹ Not all churches had the same programmatic response to COVID. This article is focused upon those that curtailed in-person meetings during the past year.

² Ezra 3:12

- **FEAR:** Fear is apprehension about a future unknown. It is natural for us to have apprehension about the future. How many people will be a part of our church when this is over? Who will have left? Will we be able to afford to keep our staff? What ministries need to change? Will our services be the same or changed? Will I be able to lead effectively in this new season? How do we deal with fear?
 - For leaders: Consider spending some time together giving voice to our fears. Sometimes we think wrongly that leaders must show no fear. What does scripture say about fear and the reason(s) we should not be afraid? Leaders need to have courage, but courage is not the absence of fear – it is doing what needs to be done despite our fears. Understanding one another's fears about what this next season will look like and our ability to lead through it will help us work together to support one another. We can support one another through our fears, but only if we know what they are. What are we fearful about?
 - For congregants: Parents fear that a year of on-line schooling and social isolation has harmed their children. People that have lost jobs or suffered diminished work hours fear that job losses may be permanent. People fear the unknown – they don't know what lies ahead in their world or in their church. What are the fears of those in our congregation? How would we know unless we ask them? What can we say and do to encourage them as they face their fears about the future?
- **UNCERTAINTY:** Uncertainty is closely related to fear in that it can result in anxiety. The uncertainty I am referencing here is like our feeling when we do not know exactly where we are or which way to go, even though we are not actually lost and not yet afraid. We are just kind of stuck because we are not sure what to do or which way to go. People wonder what is going to happen next, and they wonder about what their leaders are going to decide to do that will impact them? How can we leaders mitigate the reality of uncertainty?
 - For leaders: Uncertainty can cause paralysis which results in not moving forward. We may lack confidence that our planned course of action will provide the results we are seeking. We can mitigate these doubts by not seeking and announcing a perfect, sure-fire course of action and instead admitting that we are going to try something to see if it works. Having an exit ramp from something we are trying to do can help us move forward despite the uncertainty. Can we identify those things about which we are uncertain and create systems to provide additional data as we move forward that will increase our level of certainty in a course of action?
 - For congregants: During the early stages of the pandemic, due to a lack of experience and knowledge about this virus, decision-makers often stated a course of action and then changed their minds as more data became available. This at times created doubts about leaders' competence and sincerity. How can we communicate our intended next steps in a way that also communicates clearly that we will make adjustments should circumstances change? During a time of crisis, people look for informed, calm, and decisive leaders to guide them through. How can we truthfully assure people that we are on top of developments in these areas?

- **FATIGUE:** Tiredness and weariness is manifest in our bodies, minds, and spirit. Leaders and congregants have both been involved in a year-long struggle to cope with the events of this past year. We are all tired. Many are tired of being tired.
 - For leaders: The only known antidote for fatigue and weariness is rest and nourishment. In case you missed it, the only known remedy for fatigue and weariness is rest and nourishment. Many church leaders have worked exceptionally hard and long during this past year to care for their flocks and to keep things going.

Are you tired? Worn out? Thinking less clearly or positively? The only known remedy for this is rest and nourishment. Church leaders – *please* talk among yourselves about rest and nourishment for yourselves and put a meaningful time on your schedule to rest and refresh as soon as possible. This isn't a planning retreat – it's a time to rest and refresh. The demands of the future will be as hard as the demands of the past – maybe more so. Rest and take nourishment for your bodies and souls so that you can lead for the long haul.

- For congregants: Those we lead are as tired as we are. How might we be able to provide them with times of rest and refreshment? Is our best strategy to go “all in” as soon as possible with the demands of full church programming? Should we consider doing less for a season and to encourage people to rest and be nourished? Should we teach about rest and refreshment? How might we lead our flock to a place where they might experience rest and refreshment for their souls?³
- **GRIEF:** We are uncomfortable around grief. When someone is grieving, we tend to try to help them feel better so that the grief will stop – or at least stop around us. I'm not sure we (or I) have mastered the concept of rejoicing with those that rejoice and weeping with those that weep. I usually want the weeping to go away rather than to join in with it.
 - For leaders: God has given to us the emotion of grief. How can we leaders process our individual and collective grief over those things precious to us that have been lost? People that have left, ministry opportunities lost, people that have died, sick people that we could not visit, the ugliness of the racial and political issues we face, economic losses, closed businesses, family milestones not well celebrated and lost opportunities to share the gospel are all to be mourned. How can we process the grief and disappointments we have rather than trying to ignore them or stuff them into deep recesses of our consciousness? Grief not faced has a cumulative debilitating emotional impact and can lead to depressions. What are the things we are grieving?
 - For congregants: Those we lead are experiencing grief as we are. How can we equip them to process their grief? Have we taught them about grief? Have we

³ Psalm 23:2-3.

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taught from Lamentations or the Psalms of lament?⁴ How should we equip the flock to deal with their own grief and to come alongside others that are grieving?

We are moving into uncharted waters as our country (and world) moves out of the COVID shutdown season into whatever season lies ahead. There is fear, uncertainty, fatigue and grief all around us and within us. How we equip ourselves and those we lead to address and overcome these and other emotional realities as we move forward 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/something-to-talk-about-archives/>.

⁴ For an excellent presentation on this topic, listen to the podcast from the EFCA 2021 Theology Conference on The Psalms and Christian Lament which can be found at WWW.efca.org (go to "menu" and then "resources") or on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z0aHdZer5FQ>