

SOMETHING TO TALK ABOUT

A conversation guide for church leaders

Pruning – Lessons from Some Guy's Garage

There's this guy I know well, and this is his two-car garage. You may have noticed the absence of a car. I know a bit of the backstory. You see, there has not been a car in this garage since 1988. The owner of this garage offers no excuses for why it looks this way and why it is (and has been for a long time) unsuited for hosting a car, let alone two cars. There are reasons, however, including the fact that the owner has a number of items in the garage that used to be in his parents' home prior to them downsizing and moving. There is a lot of patio furniture in the garage because of the renovation project going on in the backyard. But those are recent additions since 1988.



The guy and his wife store keepsakes of stuff that has been accumulated over their lifetimes, you know, irreplaceable stuff like teaching notes and handouts from Bible classes taught at church decades ago, their children's childhood toys that the grandkids may want to play with some day, boxes of mementos from previous jobs; souvenirs from trips long ago; and an assortment of tools left over from previous jobs kept "just in case" even though they likely will never see daylight again. There's that wooden office desk, 3 ft. x 5 ft., that became obsolete when the home office was remodeled with a built-in desk but, when left at the curb on several trash days, no one picked up. It has been repurposed into several drawers used for storage of gardening equipment and supplies and a handy 15 square feet of flat surface upon which to stack stuff.

I feel sorry for this guy – and for his cars.

A couple weeks ago I met for a pleasant lunch with an EFCA pastor and during our conversation we talked about the post-COVID church experience and change. He mentioned that he and the church were experiencing a season of pruning. I have heard many church leaders speak similar thoughts all year. "Our church has been in a season of pruning." My first thought was Jesus and the pruning the vine thing in John 15. I was a little proud of myself for initially having a spiritual thought. Later, I thought of that guy's garage – it really could use some pruning. I thought of most of the garages on the guy's street – they looked quite the same – and all the cars parked in driveways because there was no room in their inn.

Driving home after lunch I had a dangerous thought. Why do church leaders wait for God to “prune” their personal and church vines rather than doing it periodically themselves? Why did it take COVID to cause so many churches to reconsider their programming, systems, structures and the like rather than periodically pruning their vines themselves?

My dictionary¹ defines the verb form of the word “prune” as “1) to trim dead or living parts from (a plant), and 2) to cut out (unnecessary parts, etc.).” It makes obvious sense to cut away and remove dead parts. What struck my interest was the concept of trimming or cutting out living parts as well as unnecessary parts. In John 15:1-2, Jesus says that God the Father does all three:

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.” (NIV)

Dead and dying branches are cut off, and living branches are pruned to be even more fruitful.

Are there dead branches in your life or in your church that need to be cut off? Are there things still living that need to be cut back or removed from your life or your church for it to be more fruitful?

Here are some ideas to help you start a conversation about pruning.

Why do church leaders wait for God to “prune” their personal and church vines rather than doing it periodically themselves?

- The garage guy and many church leaders seem to have forgotten the purpose of their garage or churches. The purpose of a garage is for parking cars in a protective space and storage of useful things. When the garage guy first stopped parking his cars in the garage due to it being occupied by other stuff, there wasn’t all that much excess stuff involved. But he allowed unnecessary stuff to continue filling his garage over the years. The concept of actually parking one or more cars in the garage was lost and became, at best, a secondary thought because of the gradual accumulation of more and more stuff.

Churches can be like that. Consider having your leadership start with the premise that the purpose of a church is to equip God’s people to reach lost people with the Gospel and to be ambassadors for the kingdom of God. Does our church have so much stuff going on that our primary purpose for existing has been lost among us leaders or among our congregation? How effective is our church about our Father’s business? Has our effectiveness waned over the years, or is it going strong?

- The garage guy has several broken things in his garage; tools without their chargers; toys with missing parts; a bicycle tire pump that has lost its seal; projectors and audio-visual devices that are obsolete and cannot be fixed; miscellaneous power cords to devices no longer possessed – just in case. Are there programs or things we do in our church or among us leaders that don’t work anymore that we keep on doing? Are there rituals and cultural artifacts that have lost their meaning? Is there a once favored and perhaps even once effective program that no longer attracts critical mass? Are we continuing to devote staff time and energy into propping up a program that is dead or at death’s door that we no longer intend

¹ Webster’s New World Dictionary (2002)

to strategically leverage but are unwilling to let die? What are we doing that no longer works? Do we have the leadership courage to let them go, let them die, and try something else?

- While the garage guy has several broken things in his garage, his bigger problem is that his garage is filled with unnecessary things – things that do not contribute to the benefit of the home. It's mostly these unnecessary things that prevent the guy from having space in the garage in which to accomplish the garage's purpose of safely and securely parking cars.

It is often difficult to get rid of every unnecessary thing. Over one's lifetime, we can accumulate lots of things that, though unnecessary in the here and now (and likely unnecessary in the future), we hold dear as mementos and little treasures collected throughout our lives. Must we get rid of the things that bring back memories but are not needed in the here and now? I hope not. Having treasures that help us fondly recall the precious people and events of our lives is not the problem. The problem comes when we treasure so many things of the past that it interferes with our living in the here and now.

Churches are like that, too. Newly planted churches are typically pretty lean and have a strong focus upon accomplishing their mission. Over time, however, established churches can accumulate a lot of stuff that is unnecessary to accomplishing their mission. Unnecessary things are not *bad* things – they just take up space in our lives that could and likely should be used for better purposes. List with your leadership team all of the things you have and do as a church. Which of them are not only unnecessary, but potentially sapping energy and attention from the purpose of the church? How might we eliminate them, let them die or even re-purpose them so that they once again move us forward in our mission? What are the things that we might treasure too much to get rid of and how might we treasure them in a way that does not weigh us down in the past but rather encourage us as we move into the future?

There you have it – lessons from some guy's garage. Do we remember the mission of our church? Do we have dead things that we need to cut off and remove? Are there things we have figuratively or actually lying around that are not necessary and weighing us down? Are we willing to do the pruning ourselves, or will we wait until God has to do it for us? Pruning – that's something to talk about. And the start of a new year is a great time to do it.

If you'd like to chat with the guy with that garage, you can reach him at bob.osborne@efca.org. Oops! I blew his cover... I'll be out in the garage.

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://efca-west.districts.efca.org/something-to-talk-about-archives>.