

# Something to Talk About

## A conversation guide for church leaders

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

August 1, 2020

### Who Gets to Sit at the Grownup Table?

I love my extended family. One of the joys in my life has been our frequent extended family gatherings for holidays and “just because” moments. Until very recently, most of these gatherings occurred at my parents’ home – we still do Thanksgiving and Christmas there.

Early on, my brother, sister and I, along with our spouses, sat at the large, oval dining room table which comfortably seats eight adults for dinner. It was great. Then something happened. We three couples began to “be fruitful and multiply” and, before we knew it, there were eight cousins to seat somewhere. Hence, the concept of the “grownup table” and the “kid’s table” was introduced to our family. The eight of us adults occupied the grownup table, and the eight “kids” ate in the adjacent family room or outside (as age appropriate).

Before we knew it, the eight cousins had grown up themselves and seven were married. There was still only room for eight at the grownup table, and we had to smile to ourselves when we called the table where the eight cousins and their seven spouses sat the “kids’ table” (yes, that’s fifteen adults).

And those seven cousin couples? Before we knew it, they started their own “fruitful and multiply” campaign and today there are seventeen cousin offspring that have joined our extended family. Eight of us sit at the “grownup table” and fifteen are scattered around the now-adults’ “kids’ table” and seventeen children from infant to age eight sit at the “great grandkids’ table” or toddle about bugging their parents. That’s forty of us gathered about our various tables for dinner.

The same eight of us sit at the grownup table.

Who gets to sit at the grownup table at your church and why is that something to talk about?

In applying this metaphor to church leadership, the grownup table is the place or places where significant leadership decisions are crafted. It does not have to be limited to board members or senior staff nor does it need to be restricted to the group by whom final decisions or approvals are made. The church’s grownup table refers to the place where grownups talk about grownup things. How many adults that can and should be contributing to our decision-making processes

are left out because those of us in established leadership roles keep them sitting in another room at the “kids’ table?”

My thesis in this article is that in many churches too few people are involved in the significant discussions and decisions that church leaders make and that we do so to the detriment of quality decisions, development and engagement of other leaders, and the future health and longevity of the church family we serve. Let me give some examples of the grownup table at work in the church.

- A church asks for assistance from district staff or consultants because attendance is declining, the average age of the congregation is in the sixties or seventies and they don’t see any path forward to attract younger people to the church. At the meeting with church leaders, everyone at the table is age sixty or older. People from the group they seek to reach have not been at the table for a long time.
- Church leaders are blindsided by significant conflict in the women’s ministry. Upon inquiry it is learned that the board/elders very seldom, if ever, talk about women’s ministry, needs or discipleship and, the few times they did, there was never a woman at the table.
- Decisions need to be made regarding children’s ministry programming or facilities. The decision-makers in the room have children, but the youngest of those “children” are in their late twenties. There isn’t a parent of young children or a children’s worker at the table.
- Church leaders are evaluating themselves and their ministries in light of recent events highlighting racism and race-related issues in their community. The leaders conclude that there are very few people of color in the community, our “numbers” are okay, and there is no evidence of racism in the church. There was no person of color at the table.

The autonomous churches of the EFCA have various leadership structures based upon their understanding and application of scripture<sup>1</sup>. Our structures do not need to prevent church leaders from inviting people to the grownup table to learn from them and help them make wise leadership decisions. Here are some things we can talk about regarding inviting others to sit at the grownup table with us to help us gather the information we need to make wise decisions in the church.

- What is the current age of our board members/elders? What simple steps might we take to begin developing people for future leadership responsibilities?<sup>2</sup> Can we invite people to attend the non-confidential portions of our meetings to assess their interest and current leadership capacities?

---

<sup>1</sup> This article is intended to apply to any EFCA church, regardless of its convictions regarding Biblical standards for church leadership.

<sup>2</sup> A future article will address the topic of training for potential elders. Preview: I’m going to suggest that for most churches, a simple process is better than a complex or long-term process.

- When we discuss issues that relate to people in life stages other than our own, who can we invite to join us? Can we develop a list of “go-to” people to give input and advice to us in areas of their expertise, whether related to life-stage or other competencies? Who can speak to children’s or student ministries? Women’s ministries? Small groups? Families/parents with young children? Finance issues? Policy development? Facilities issues? Health and safety? Elders/board members that act as though they are experts in all issues are sadly mistaken.
- Are we leaders humble enough to hold our individual opinions and preferences loosely and to seek, listen attentively and even follow the advice of others? This does not mean blindly following other’s advice; it means choosing to not believe that we know better than others or don’t need what they have to offer because of our ministry title, role or responsibilities.
- Do we find that we often need to make significant decisions quickly or that time pressures make the idea of inviting others to sit at the grownup table for the discussion seem untenable? This may be an indication that the team is not thinking far enough into the future or developing contingency plans for predictable events such as staff departures, equipment failures, or likely results of continuing downward trends in attendance, engagement, finance and other key health indicators. What are we currently spending time on that we might stop doing, delegate to others or handle some other way to provide time for serious discussion of significant issues with a larger body of people at the table?

I still love sitting at the grownup table at family gatherings. And I also love engaging with my sons and my nieces and nephews and their spouses to learn about their worlds. As the grandkids and grandnieces and grandnephews continue to grow, I will love more and more to learn about their worlds, too. For me to play my role in the family well, I need to engage with them and listen and learn. Who knows, doing so may provide me the joy of meaningfully influencing them, too. I need to spend time at their table, and they at mine.

Who should we invite to sit at the grownup table?

*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).*

*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/>.*