

Something to Talk About

A conversation guide for church leaders

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The Sheep I Don't Really Know

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 <https://efcawest.efcadistrict.org/church-leadership/> or <https://efcawest.efcadistrict.org/something-to-talk-about-archives/>.

I attended the EFCA One conference in Illinois this past June. People often ask me what my favorite or most meaningful thing at the conference was. The conference was full of good preaching, singing, significant conference “business” decisions and workshops, but my favorite thing was not exactly “at” the conference; it was one evening after the conference.

Most of the EFCA West team had dinner at a restaurant one evening and, to my surprise, several of Reach Global’s Berlin team came in for dessert and sat at a table directly behind us. I and others of our team were invited to join them. The team leader, Katie Dudgeon, introduced the members of the team to us and asked them to share their stories. Their stories of life and ministry were amazing and reflected a deep commitment to Christ, one another, and to the lost people of Berlin, one of the world’s great cities. We must have sat there for a couple of hours.

Did I forget to mention that the twelve or so amazing people gathered there were almost all from the age group known as “millennials?”

“Why,” you might ask, “would it matter to you that they were millennials?” Well, as I reflected that evening and afterwards it dawned on me more clearly than ever that I am not the future of the Church – these and their peers are the future. And I was and am excited about that future.

It dawned on me that I really don’t know a whole lot of millennials – know as in knowing about their lives, passions, and dreams related to following Christ – in part because I don’t often ask. In fact, most millennials I actually “know” are my adult sons and my nieces and nephews - relatives. As a church leader, I need to do more than just teach or direct our future leaders, I need to know them, and I have been falling short. How about you and your leadership team? How many people that are not relatives that are a generation younger or older than you do you spend quality time with and get to know? That’s something to talk about.

Here are some discussion starters for your conversation.

- Let's assume there are four seasons of adulthood:
 - Adults from about age 20-39
 - Adults from about age 40-59
 - Adults from about age 60-75
 - Adults from age 76 and older

How many people from the two or three groups to which you don't belong do you know and talk with on an intentional basis who are not related to you? Who are they and how did you get to know them? As church leaders, how do we shepherd them?

- Discuss with your team the pitfalls of being isolated from other generations as well as the benefits of connecting well with them.
- Is there an age group or two that are especially not well known by members of our leadership team? How might we go about learning their faces, names, and stories and ministering to them?
- What behaviors might we need to change, individually and collectively, in order to broaden the demographics in our church with which we truly are connected? How can we be intentional about broadening our meaningful contacts?
- It's easy to engage in generalities, but action requires specificity. What are the names of some people that we leaders should know and with whom we should engage?

I must confess in recent years, my contacts with millennials and younger and with the elderly in my church have become too few in number and too shallow in depth. I need to know those younger to encourage them, mentor them, empower them and develop leaders and followers for today and tomorrow. And, I need to better my relationships with those a decade or two older than me so that I can learn what it means to be faithful as I go deeper and deeper into my senior years and eventually go to "rest with my fathers."

A few Sunday's ago, I walked past one of the men I had served with many years ago on our church's board. I walked past him on my way to my seat after having joined the other elders at the front to pray over a young woman going to serve as a missionary. He was recently widowed and is infirm. He sat along the aisle in a wheelchair, stooped over and slightly trembling. He is more infirm and lonelier than I ever want to be – but he was there that Sunday morning because that's where he wanted to be as he eagerly awaits seeing his Savior face-to-face. Sadly, I've smiled and walked past him several times in the recent past. But that Sunday I knelt down and said, "Vern, your faithfulness is an encouragement to me." He didn't hear me, so I had to repeat it. The service continued and I walked to my seat.

I need people in my life like Vern, and so do you.

Vern Gunther, I need you and salute you! Millennials and younger, I need to get to know you. And that's something to talk about.

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