

Something to Talk About

A conversation guide for church leaders

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Predictable Is Preventable

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/>.

Gordon Graham has had an amazing influence on an entire generation of public safety professionals, including me. He is a risk manager, and one of his signature quotes is this: "Predictable is preventable." If a risk is reasonably predictable, it can either be prevented or have its impacts mitigated by careful management of that risk. One of the important aspects of church leadership is caring for the congregation – this includes managing and mitigating risks. Most church leadership teams I've spoken with admit that they have never had any in-depth conversations on this topic and have no plans for doing so. One only needs to read, watch or listen to the news to know that this is clearly something to talk about.

Real world risk management is more complex than some pithy statement, yet I have found it true that most big risks can be eliminated or have the severity of their impacts significantly mitigated when leaders engage in two important disciplines: training and planning. Training may be addressed another time. This month's topic is planning.

Current events tell us that churches and their congregants are not immune from the disasters of today. Earthquakes, fires, floods, violence, explosions, allegations of abuse, medical emergencies, power failures, hurricanes, tornadoes, and accidents abound and impact the elect as well as the lost. When one of these hit the community or church that we serve and leaders are faced with the "what do we do now" question, leaders all too often are left to figure things out on their own, on the fly, and end up wishing that they had had some kind of plan. So often we hear some leader somewhere interviewed by the media and saying, "I never thought it could happen here." Well, it can happen here, and it may well happen to you. As leaders, we bear the responsibility to be prepared. Here are some questions and thoughts to help guide your conversation.

- Does our church have any plan(s) for dealing with emergency situations? If so, are they current? Do they address the wide variety of risks that our congregation may face? Do all of our leaders and staff know of these plans and are they trained in how to implement them?
- Might we have facilities that could provide safe shelter and refuge in the aftermath of a community or regional disaster? Could our facilities be shared with the community as a whole?
- If our church facilities were unexpectedly rendered unusable, where might our congregation find alternative meeting space? Are there other churches nearby that might enter into agreement to provide meeting space for one another in times of disaster?
- What does our insurance cover and what are the coverage amounts? Are they enough? Insurance companies often have information and resources to help churches prepare for emergencies.
- Who is authorized to speak to the media about issues related to the church? Be sure to have more than one person. Churches that designate the pastor to be the spokesperson invariably have their emergency while the pastor is out of town. Create a spokesperson hierarchy such as, senior pastor, executive/associate pastor, board chairperson, etc. Your hierarchy may need to change based upon who is holding what position. Don't put someone who cannot think on their feet in charge of media relations.
- What should we do if someone suffers a medical emergency on the church campus or during a church service? Who will take the lead in providing care and summoning assistance? Who will direct emergency responders to the victim? Should we have an AED (automated external defibrillator) and who is/should be trained to use it?
- Have we ever done a fire drill? Practiced an evacuation? In case of emergency, how would we evacuate the buildings? How will we evacuate children and infants in the nursery? Where will parents re-unite with their children? What will we do when a fire alarm is sounded? Have we ever told the congregation what we would do in the event of an emergency? If we don't tell them, how will they know?
- Does our church have a safety or security team? Should we? I prefer to call these "safety teams" rather than "security teams" and to have them take an all-hazards approach to safety that includes identifying and fixing all types of safety hazards (lots of people slip and fall – very few are shot). If a church has public safety professionals among the congregation (police, fire, EMT, etc.), they often will jump at the opportunity to utilize their job skills in the ministry of their church. *Always contact your insurance company before creating a safety team to get their advice and ensure their actions will be covered by your insurance policy.*
- Assign someone to write your emergency plan – don't just talk about it. Have a separate page for each type of emergency listed above as well as any others you can think of.

Here are some suggestions of things to do to assist in your preparation.

- EFCA helps churches and ReachGlobal partners prepare for and respond to disasters in their communities and around the world. This is a top-notch ministry that does not merely

address short-term issues immediately after a disaster, but also the long-term needs in a community. The Crisis Response team can provide training materials and assistance to local congregations to prepare them to cope with their own situations and also to provide assistance to others. To me, it's almost sinful that so many EFCA churches are not aware of this ministry and that so many that are aware are not engaged. Please take a moment and look at their information by going to their Webpage

(<https://go.efca.org/ministries/reachglobal/crisis-response>) and sharing that page with your leadership team. Most of our churches are small, but every church can help in some way.

- FEMA has an excellent resource entitled *Guide for Developing High-Quality Emergency Operations Plans for Houses of Worship (June 2013)* that is available in pdf form from their Website (https://www.fema.gov/media-library-data/20130726-1919-25045-2833/developing_eops_for_houses_of_worship_final.pdf).
- Contact your police and fire departments to determine what you might do to be better prepared. Ask what services they provide, and let them know of your willingness to assist them by using your facilities as staging areas, command posts, or rest stations for emergency responders. Ask the police department about active shooter prevention and response – we don't like to think about this, but should. No congregation is immune.
- Contact your local Red Cross and Salvation Army staff to determine what services they can provide, how you might assist them in a larger-scale emergency.
- Periodically, have a breakfast or luncheon (or just a good meeting) with all the police officers in your congregation. They are likely armed during your services. While you may know who they are, remember that, in an emergency, *they* need to recognize one another. The purpose of the meeting is just so that they will recognize one another.
- Your plans do not need to be complex, but *they must be written*. Unwritten plans are just ideas; they are not actual plans and they create confusion and uncertainty. By putting them in writing, leaders can periodically review and update them as needed. Speaking of reviewing plans, is doing so on your calendar? If not, it likely won't happen.

Our calling is to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood (Acts 20:28). This includes watching out for their safety. Surely, that's something to talk about.

As a 38-year policing professional, the safety of those in our churches is near and dear to my heart. If I can be of assistance to you by way of information or referral, feel free to contact me at the e-mail address below.

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