

Something to Talk About

A conversation guide for church leaders

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First World Problems

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/>.

In late June I listened to the five-minute “Daily Dose” message from North Coast Church, a short daily devotional I get each weekday. This segment was unique as Pastor Chris Brown was in Los Barilles, Baja California Sur, Mexico, at a small church that North Coast has partnered with and is helping financially and in many practical ways. I was struck by the stark simplicity of the structure and surroundings and by the thought of what a significant blessing their help was and is to the congregation in Los Barilles.

The following day, I was walking on the sidewalk at an outdoor Southern California shopping mall and, for a few brief moments, I fell in behind two young women who were engaged in an animated conversation. One of the women was visibly and demonstrably distressed by a series of personal misfortunes that had befallen her in the past day. “It’s really frustrating that no one seems to be available this week,” she complained with sufficient enthusiasm for me to hear from several yards away. “My pedicure was cancelled. My hairdresser isn’t available this week or next. And Tina, who does my nails, isn’t answering her phone.” The women turned the corner and I lost further contact – I’ll never know how her catastrophe played out.

I chuckled – it’s so easy to laugh at others. My mind went back to the church in Los Barilles. Then it hit me. Those of us experiencing first world problems usually have no idea how silly our problems sound to others because they are so real to us. I got to thinking, are there leadership implications for this? I believe there are, and that’s something to talk about.

My first career was in policing. One of the things we sought to keep in mind was that, even though we spent most of our time dealing with known or suspected criminals and criminality, the vast, vast majority of people living in the communities we served were law-abiding, decent folk. I believe the same holds true among church leaders who sometimes spend the majority of their time, even for a season, dealing with church problems and people who are suffering or angry at God, us, the church, or whatever. If we are not careful, we can fall prey to losing sight of the simple blessings from God because we focus so much on the problems we face. As I

reflected, many of the problems I face in my service as a leader in my church are so “first world” – I doubt any in the congregation in Los Barillos would even imagine them being problems.

Let’s have a conversation about the good things God is doing among us as well as some of the problems other churches face that we might be able to help address. Here are some conversation starters.

- What are some of the things that God has done and is doing in and through the people in our congregation? Who is growing in their faith? Who has come to faith? Who trusted God in the midst of a crisis? Who has made a solid decision in obedience to God? What should we be celebrating?
- How has God been good to our church? What was the vision of its founders? What good things have happened in our history? What ministries were effective during their time/season in the sun? Do we have “stones of remembrance?” (Joshua 4:4-7)
- What might the problems we are facing today say to us about our ministry or personal priorities? Are we enjoying the things that God has allowed us to have? Let’s be careful not to trash our culture – it is what it is and we need to make disciples within it anyway. Let’s ask, “For what should we be grateful to God in our ministry context?”
- Consider putting aside some time on your leadership team meeting agendas for thanksgiving – recognizing the blessings of God prior to tackling the difficult things He is allowing us to face.
- Do we know of churches that have basic needs that we can supply? Are we looking for opportunities? If our church has needs that another church can supply, have we asked for help?
- Are there local churches or churches within our EFCA “tribe” that we could partner with to help fledgling congregations elsewhere move forward in ways that neither church could do alone?
- Is there a struggling church near or far that we could adopt as a partner ministry, where we might serve and bless one another rather than merely provide handouts?

I am in the midst of navigating some first world issues at my church related to schedules, buildings and ministry priorities and strategy. At the moment, the thought of a simple, basic structure filled with people excited about loving God and others, growing in their faith, and making disciples sounds like a nice place to lead. Yet, when I reflect for a moment, I realize that God has blessed our church in so many ways, both currently and in the past, that would not have been possible without our growth and its attendant problems. Are we celebrating God’s goodness as we navigate the challenges before us? That’s something to talk about.

My fingernails are a bit grubby... I wonder if Tina is available...

*Let us know if we can help and how your conversation goes.
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