

SOMETHING TO TALK ABOUT

A conversation guide for church leaders

You've Lost that Lovin' Feeling?

*"You never close your eyes anymore when I kiss your lips.
And there's no tenderness like before in your fingertips.
You're trying hard not to show it (baby)
But baby, baby I know it.
You've lost that lovin' feeling..."*

The baby boomers among us will instantly recognize these lyrics made famous by The Righteous Brothers. But non-boomers among us, do not fret because I am not calling your attention to the singers or the song but, rather, to the lyrics. For the message of the lyrics is important for those of us engaged in church leadership ministries. Read them again, then the rest of this article.

There is an organization called Blue Courage that sends me a daily “inspirational” thought about which I am supposed to think. It’s a non-church version of the daily devotional. A while back it contained a quote from a book I had read, titled The Leadership Challenge by James Kouzes and Barry Posner. The book is on my bookshelf, so I retrieved it and looked for the quote.

“The best-kept secret of successful leaders is love: staying in love with leading, with the people who do the work, with what their organizations produce, and with those who honor the organization by using its work. Leadership is not an affair of the head. Leadership is an affair of the heart.”

I have yet to meet the church leader who does not want to lead well (although I am sometimes amazed by what they consider leading well...). But I have met many church leaders, both paid and volunteer, who do not love leading. I have also met many church leaders who are just tired of leading or have abandoned it altogether and are just trying to make it to the end – whether that end is retirement or landing another job or taking on another line of work. They persevere, or at least keep working, but they have lost their love for leading in ministry.

Unfortunately, The Righteous Brothers didn’t give us any strategies for fixing this problem. The best they could do in the song’s lyrics was to “get down on my knees” and beg their lover to “bring it on back” – whatever that means.

There are many wrong reasons why a pastor or other church leaders might love being a leader. Sitting at the head table, getting praise from our followers, exercising power and authority (yes, they are two very different things), ministerial housing allowances, etc. Yet all these reasons belie the reason God has gifted some of us with leadership abilities and success.

It's a shame that the English language has a single word for love ranging from loving ice cream to the deepest of loves between committed humans, not to mention the "no greater love" of laying down one's life for his friends. I suspect that the love that The Righteous Brothers sing about is not the passion of a quick fling but rather the deepest of affections one human has for another – we perhaps might say, "You've lost that agape feeling."

Deep love, abiding love is not situation dependent. Such love endures the ups and downs of life together. We persevere through the dark and difficult times because of our love. We walk with rather than abandon those we love when they are facing tough times. I Corinthians 13 remains a great description of what love looks like.

So, how does this translate into a pastor or other church leader's life? What happens when we lose that loving feeling for our ministry of leadership? What might we do about it? Can we get it back? And does effective leadership require it? Here are some ideas for having a conversation about loving being a leader, loving the work of leading, loving those we lead, and loving the reason we lead. It's something to talk about.

- When a person tires under a heavy load, they need rest. They also need others to come alongside them. Do you feel the freedom to talk about beginning to love your "loving feeling" with your co-laborers or with trusted friends and mentors? If not, that is a problem that needs to be addressed. When you are becoming tired and worn out, beginning to lose that lovin' feeling, is the time to talk about it. Not when you collapse. Not when you hate it but cannot quit. The only cure for tired and worn out is rest and refreshment. Being stoic about it merely makes it worse. Can you and your team talk about what is going on in your souls? Christian fellowship is so much more than chatting in the lobby and talking about sports and travel. It's encouraging one another to love and to good works and bearing one another's burdens.
- Sadly, many "older" pastors have grown weary of their job, yet they continue in it despite having lost their love. It's pretty easy to spot. They have no drive. They have no vision for the future. They let the little things decay and fall apart. They often retreat to preaching rather than pastoring. Just to be clear: When a leader's leadership is no longer effective, they need to fix it quickly or stop leading. This is not age specific. When a student ministries director grows tired of dealing with students and their issues and their parents, they need to fix this quickly or move on to something else. Sadly, many keep going through the motions at the expense of those they should be leading and the health of the church and themselves. "I want to retire but cannot afford to" is not a reason to hold the health and effectiveness of a church hostage. It is a time to rest and refresh and to reengage strong or to stop.

How is your retirement fund going? Church board member – are you watching your staff member's retirements? Is the church contributing? It is always my recommendation that if a church cannot adequately compensate a staff member, they should not hire him/her. It is unfair to the person and to the church. Have you discussed the inevitability of some form of retirement or work curtailment in the future? Have we discussed the inevitability of fluctuations over time in the depth of our love for our ministry?

- The same thing that happens to church staff happens to church board members. Is it okay in the culture of your church and leadership team for a board member to stop serving when they grow weary of their tasks and cannot seem to reignite their zeal for leading? Do we ever talk about this? Can we be honest with one another?
- One way to nurture the love of leading in a church is a sabbatical – a time of rest and renewal. I'm not talking about the academic sabbatical – a time of research, writing books and articles, etc. – but a time of

rest, renewal, thinking, time with family, and thoughtfully considering the future. Does your church have a plan or structure for this? For paid staff, I generally recommend two or three months every seven years or less. For board members, I must share that my church has a six-year maximum for serving as an elder. I am sad every time I finish year six, then enjoy a blessed year off, and find myself anxious to return to serving. How do you refresh and rekindle your board members' love for leading? Churches often provide sabbatical rest and restoration times for lead/senior pastors, but what about other ministry staff?

Leadership has its ups and downs. It's what we do during the downs that gets us back to the ups. It is helpful to remember that we serve in ministries of leadership because we love God, love Jesus the Lord of his Church, and he has gifted us to be channels of his love to those in our churches and those outside who are perishing. We don't lead for the praise of man – or do we?

I used to teach an adult Bible class for married couples at our church. The topic of diminishing feelings of love for a spouse came up fairly often. I was asked what one should do to "bring back" that loving feeling. My answer? Do loving things. It's easier than we think, and harder than it should be. Sacrifice. Give. Encourage. Exhort. Act respectfully. Hold hands. Do loving things.

Can church leaders "bring back that lovin' feeling?" Oftentimes, yes – and we do it by doing loving things even when we don't feel like it. Treat leading with the respect and effort it is due. Rest, renew, and start leading again. But the time may come when we cannot see ourselves loving church leadership again. The good news is that we can quit. We can step aside and let someone else that still has it take our place. This is called succession. To occupy a position of leadership but not lead effectively in the now is to not finish well. And it damages our church and its people.

No, I do not recommend an epiphany about disliking the tasks associated with one's church leadership role resulting in a sudden departure – that is unfair to the church. But a considered approach to navigating such a change should be started. Don't put it off. An unhealthy leader leads an unhealthy church.

All church leaders are interim. Unless the church dies while we are at the helm, someone will follow us. We lead but for a season. A key responsibility of leaders is to know when their season has ended and to end well. That's good stewardship.

These kinds of conversations can be difficult, but the EFCA West team is ready to help and walk with you on your journey. We don't know what you are thinking or feeling unless you let us know. Please don't hesitate to email or call us. We are here to serve you and the church – and we still love doing so.

How might we restore that lovin' feeling? That's something to talk about – not something to hide.

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>.