

# Something to Talk About

## A conversation guide for church leaders

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### Confusing Mission with Task

I've become more and more convinced that one of the problems in many if not most churches I serve is that there is confusion between the mission and the tasks associated with the mission. Those of us serving in leadership may want to blame those that follow us for this confusion, but I think it's more prevalent among leaders than we might expect. Including me.

It's not hard to differentiate between mission and task at the intellectual level – we know that the mission is what we are trying to accomplish and that tasks are the actions or work we do to accomplish the mission. But it's often hard for us to differentiate between the two in real life – in the day-to-day actions we take that we think are furthering the mission but, in reality, are not. We can unintentionally find ourselves focused on our tasks rather than the mission. And that's something to talk about.

Let me illustrate with a story. I suspect that all of us have had an experience like this. It's a bathroom story, but please read on. It happens to me a lot in airports.

Have you ever used a restroom and, after washing your hands (for twenty seconds or more with hot water and soap, perhaps singing "Happy Birthday" twice through in your head to ensure you washed for the full twenty seconds..., but I digress). You shake the water off your hands and reach for a paper towel from the towel dispenser only to find that you cannot get a towel to come out. Towels are there, but they won't budge. Standing there with hands dripping and a short line beginning to form behind you, you push up on the bottom towel in the dispenser to loosen it up, but it still won't come out. So, you push harder and fold the bottom paper towel and finally forcefully pull on it only to dislodge a wad of 15-20 towels, many of which fall onto the wet countertop, sink or filthy floor. All you needed was one or two paper towels, but you ended up wasting a bunch more – and to make it worse, you have a line of witnesses behind you, none of whom will have trouble getting their paper towel to come out after your failure.

What happened? Let me suggest that the problem stems from someone that performed their task but did not understand their mission.

There is an employee whose task it is to fill the paper towel dispenser. At least that's what he or she thinks the task is. They are supplied with paper towels and a key to the dispenser and usually have a standardized route and time to check dispensers to ensure they are stocked with towels. Since their task is to stock the dispensers, they fill them with towels.

While the attendant's task is to stock dispensers with towels, it is not to fill them with towels – and there is a big difference. Because the mission – the desired outcome and the purpose for having a towel dispenser in the first place, is that when a person reaches for a paper towel, a towel is there and one comes out. The desired outcome is that a person gets a towel out of the dispenser when he or she needs one and that they can then dry their hands. The task of filling the dispenser with as many towels as possible actually defeats the mission because the customer cannot get a towel to come out.

What on earth does this story have to do with church leaders? Well, it's the leaders' responsibility to define the mission and ensure that the tasks people are performing are actually helping to accomplish the mission. Let me suggest a few areas you may want to discuss among the leadership team. I'm sure you can think of more.

- You may as well check the towel dispensers. Do those that fill them know their mission?
- What tasks have we given the greeters during services? Do they understand their mission? Have we as leaders ever told them what their mission actually is? It's more than passing out a document and collecting an offering. Are they focused on the mission or their task?
- Teachers and preachers – what is the purpose of teaching and preaching? May I suggest that it is life change rather than transfer of knowledge? Is our teaching and preaching resulting in life change and how would we know it is happening?
- What is the mission of your elders or governing board? Obviously they should be focused upon the mission of the church, but what is the intended outcome of their work? Is it unity? Unanimity? Keeping people happy? Making the best decision possible under the circumstances? The task is, minimally, attending and participating in the meetings, but what is the mission?
- When we assess individual and collective work performance for leaders and staff, do we focus upon tasks or the mission?
- When our worship services end, what do we want the congregation to do? Do we want them to hang out, build relationships and share and pray with one another? Do we thwart that mission by engaging in tasks such as stacking chairs or playing loud music after the service that interferes with what we want the congregation to do? Do our custodians and musicians know their mission after the service?

Most of the time when I pause to consider the relationship between the tasks I perform and the mission that those tasks are supposed to support I come away with two revelations. One is that I am prone to focus on the task more than the mission. The other is that when I focus on the mission, my tasks are more fun and more rewarding and more satisfying to do. And they accomplish the mission.

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Are we confusing mission and tasks? That's something to talk about.

*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/>.*