

Something to Talk About

A conversation guide for church leaders

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Pervasive Preferences

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 recently purchased a cup of coffee at a local coffee place. The coffee served is often so hot that it burns my lips and mouth unless I wait for 5-10 minutes before drinking it. I don't like to wait to drink my coffee, so I have come to ask the barista to add a couple of ice cubes so that I don't burn my mouth. A recent coffee conversation went like this.

Barista: May I help you?

Bob: I'd like a small cup of coffee with a couple of ice cubes so it doesn't burn my mouth.

Barista: Would you like the ice on the bottom or the top?

Bob: Doesn't the ice just float to the surface until it melts?

Barista: Some people like to have their coffee poured over the ice and some like their ice added to the coffee.

Bob: Does it really matter? Doesn't the ice just melt anyway?

Barista: It matters to some people.

Bob: Do whatever is most convenient to you.

She put the ice in last. It didn't matter to me and I didn't want to decide.

As I began to drink my coffee the importance of one of the barista's statements suddenly struck me. *"It matters to some people."* Yes, my friends and fellow leaders, we live in an age of pervasive personal preferences. Options and personal choices for all kinds of things abound. We have come to expect that we should always "have it your way." We live in a culture that more and more believes that the words "my truth" actually makes sense. It seems that whatever we decide to do or do not do matters to some people – and they make that fact known. The impact of pervasive preferences impacts our churches. People transfer between

churches regularly to indulge personal preferences, oftentimes over very minor issues. The impact upon churches of a culture of pervasive preference is something to talk about.

Usually, when church leaders talk about the problems caused by personal preferences we talk about the strongly-held competing preferences found within the congregation that we lead. We talk about the personal preferences found among us leaders far less often and the impacts they may have upon the congregations we lead and the outcomes of our ministries may be far greater than those of other congregants because our personal preferences impact how and where we lead – whether or not we are willing to admit it. Since church leaders are the focus of these articles, let's start with our focus upon the preferences that we leaders bring to our work, to our meetings and to the congregations we serve. Here are some prompts to help you start your conversation.

- What are some areas of our leadership that are based upon our preferences rather than commands of scripture? This question does not infer that acting on our preferences is wrong per se – it seeks to help us understand how many of our decisions are actually based upon preferences because Scripture does not give clear direction on them. For example, I am always surprised by the number of church folk who believe their church's governance documents are as sacred, or almost as sacred, as their Bible when they are actually mostly based upon preferences.
- For those teams willing to be vulnerable, what are some of our personal preferences related to our church that are so dear to us that it would be hard to let go? What would it take to motivate us to sacrifice that kind of preference to reach others who do not share that preference?
- What are some personal preferences differences for different generational groups, not only in the church but among our leadership team members? Think of at least the four categories of seniors, middle-aged adults, younger adults and youth. Go beyond just style of music. Consider relationships, vocational choices, social issues, etc. How should our understanding of these preferences impact our strategic decisions regarding the future of the church? How might these differences play into the results that may be seen in multigenerational ministries? How might we use this understanding to ensure that we leave a faith legacy and a healthy church to succeeding generations?
- Many churches are actively seeking to be multicultural as well as multigenerational. How might the cultural and personal preferences of various people groups and cultures impact our ministries? What are some of the preferences of the various cultures that may be present in your community? If your leadership team is not multicultural, be careful to avoid stereotyping when you engage with this question – at least do some research so that you are not just guessing. One “aha” moment for me was when it dawned on me that there are many different cultures and groups that speak Spanish – Spanish-speaking is not a single people group.
- Are there areas of teaching that we should consider to help us and the church have a proper understanding of personal preferences and how to manage them in a church context? How can we help people (including ourselves) keep a loose grip on personal preferences while

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holding tightly to Scriptural obedience? How might we leaders prove to be good examples of this (1 Peter 3:5)?

Someday, I may have the boldness to step up to the register and order a “coffee with four ice cubes on the bottom.” Until then, I have plenty of other preferences to manage. How about you? Our pervasive preferences are something to laugh at, but they are also something to talk about. Enjoy the conversation.

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