

SOMETHING TO TALK ABOUT

A conversation guide for church leaders

But I Don't Want to Live on the Mission Field!

Sometimes when I feel led to write an article for you readers, I find that I am writing to myself, too. This is one of those articles, so please don't take offense; rather, walk with me while I try to figure this out.

The majority of my work is with churches that are struggling. Occasionally I get to work with a church that is thriving and trying to get even better, but much more often my work is with those that are struggling.

A very common trait of struggling churches is this: they spend their time focused on and worrying about what's happening inside the church than reaching the lost people that are outside the church. I oftentimes wonder if what I am seeing in these churches is what happened to the church in Ephesus which went from Paul's visits in Acts 18 and 19, his prayer for their elders in Acts 20, his letters to the Ephesian church and the two to Timothy, to having Jesus threaten to remove their lampstand unless they repent and do what they did at first. What happened in the 45 or so years between Paul's first visit in Acts 18 and the ominous threat in Revelation 2? Could that be what's happening to us? Could it be happening to me? Surely this is something to talk about.

For most of my adult life I have financially supported missionaries. I have felt secure in "doing my part" in the Church carrying out the Great Commission and Acts 1:8. I contributed financially, but never felt "called" to go to the mission field. A few times a missionary or church worker suggested that my "secular" employment was inferior to what my life could be like if only I were to quit that job and go into "full-time Christian service" which apparently meant working in a church or someplace "over there."

"But I don't want to live on the mission field," I would think to myself. Then I would answer that some are called to go, and some are called to support those who go from the home base. After all no one could "go" if everyone went and no one stayed back to work and fund their support.

"But I don't want to live on the mission field." How stupid of me. I have always lived "on the mission field." The mission field has been all around me, but I paid scant attention to it – I was busy doing church. I am on the mission field, and so are you and the church you serve – but oftentimes we pay little to no attention to it – we're too busy doing church. And our congregations are too busy, too.

I was about 10 days old when I began my lifetime of being part of the church, starting in the church nursery. I was saved at age 6. Much of my life has been spent “doing church.” It took years before I realized that reinvigorating our love for the unsaved people all around us is critical to our spiritual health and the health of our churches.

Here are some ideas to start your own conversation.

- Have a conversation with your leadership team/board about the mission field surrounding your church. Who are they? Do we have a strategy for bringing the gospel to those people? Are we leaders living out that strategy? Is our congregation aware of it and living it out?
- Do we encourage the church to work inside the church or to share the gospel outside our doors? Which workers get the most or loudest accolades?
- When we leaders engage in conversation with those we lead, do we even occasionally inquire about who they are seeking to lead to Christ and how it is going? Do we pray with them about reaching those people?
- Do we celebrate when someone comes to faith in Christ? Are we seeing baptisms? New disciples? If not, why not (and no excuses are allowed!)?
- If the vocal voices in our congregation just want to “do church,” do we honor their “want” or work to lead them to God’s call to share the Gospel?
- As a church leader, do I grieve over the lost people I know and see and the lostness of this fallen world? Do I intentionally seek and seize opportunities to share the Gospel?

After 8 ½ years of work with struggling churches I believe that many if not most of us (me, too) need to do what Jesus told the church in Ephesus to do.

“Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first.”¹

We don’t need to go to the mission field – we’re already here.

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

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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>.

¹ Revelation 2:5a (NIV)