

SOMETHING TO TALK ABOUT

A conversation guide for church leaders

The Best Gifts Church Leaders Can Give 2021 Edition

Last December, the Something to Talk About article bore the same title but without the date. At the time, I was not planning for a sequel this year. But, as I thought about what to write and what we might talk about this year end, I was drawn back to the same topic.

The 2020 edition included seven gifts: The gifts of relationship, clarity, calm, teaching, example, reality, and finishing well. As another difficult and tumultuous year comes to a close, we look forward to a new year and, for most of us, look forward to a better season of life and ministry. I offer for your consideration and discussion wee bit shorter Christmas gift list to consider giving to our church families. Though last year's items are still very important, I believe these gifts may benefit you and your church greatly in this season. What we can give to our churches this season is something to talk about.

Here's the list for 2021:

- **The gift of stability.** The congregations we lead have been knocked around, and sometimes knocked over, for almost two years. They have endured some of the most divisive moments in our recent history – seasons of division, doubts, unanswered questions, fears, broken relationships, loss of trust in leaders and institutions, and the list goes on and on. And this is not just in our society, but in our churches. Many have lost loved ones due to COVID and some have endured the worst illness they have ever had. Some had COVID and it felt like a case of the flu – and many have difficulty understanding the significant fear of this disease or the opposite, more cavalier approaches to it others have that they do not.

When asked how they are doing, church family usually reply that they are fine. But, in all likelihood, they are not. Inside, they are hurting – their world has been significantly shaken, and they need someplace where they can stand firmly and securely and to feel safe and comforted. That place can and should be within our church family.

This may not be the season to introduce huge new strategies or make major changes in our churches. Rather, it may be a time where we need to settle the flock, comfort the sheep, dress their wounds, be a presence among them, and speak words of encouragement –

familiar words of which we need to be reminded from time to time. If we are way off course, we need to make needed adjustments; but remember that many in our churches are shell shocked by the events of the last two years and living on the edge.

How can we church leaders give stability to our congregation during these turbulent times? How can we encourage forward Gospel momentum while helping the people we lead feel secure in taking the path that lies ahead and in trusting their church leaders? How fast should we move in this season? Can the sheep keep up? What is on the drawing board? What is most important *now*?

- **The gift of authenticity.** The people we care for and lead have endured a long season of duplicity, hypocrisy, fake news, fake facts, virtue signaling, and social media “happy” posts from others. One’s political or social identity doesn’t matter for this to be true. People are longing for authenticity in relationships and leadership, and we have a great opportunity to provide it for them.

We can demonstrate authenticity by admitting that we have struggled, too. We can be authentic in the way we use stories and illustrations in our teaching. We can be authentic by admitting that we leaders have never encountered a season like this before and that some of our decisions and strategies may not have accomplished what was intended and perhaps even caused others unnecessary hurt. We can be authentic by listening to those we lead – truly listening to sense their heart rather than judge their behaviors or justify our actions or provide a response or solution to their hurts.

- **The gift of lament.** For some reason the myth that Christ-followers should be happy all the time and not feel deeply hurt persists among Christ followers. I know that in my formative years I seldom heard any teaching or preaching about Christian lament. I certainly was not encouraged to practice it.

The scriptures are filled with examples of lament. Job, the Psalms, the prophecies of Jeremiah and Isaiah. We sometimes pluck the “great is thy faithfulness” verses from Lamentations, but don’t teach much else.

The EFCA’s 2021 Theology Conference teaching on the Psalms and Christian Lament was eye-opening for me (you can access it at <https://go.efca.org/podcasts/efca-theology-podcast> and choose episode 207). Some good teaching on Christian lament and sharing our innermost thoughts with God could be a lifesaving, soothing salve for the emotional wounds of some of our hurting sheep who think they need to hold back from God their innermost hurts and thoughts, pretending to be happy, because they have never been taught otherwise.

- **The gift of our hope in Christ,** and that it is not in our circumstances. Our sinful human nature thinks that we are the solution to the world’s problems. But we are not. We’ve read the story, and the ending is pretty dramatic. It is in Christ that we have hope; not in our

government, savings and retirement accounts, social activism, military might, or country of origin or residence. It is in Christ.

It is so important that we leaders do not succumb to offering a form of cliché Christianity to tired and hurting people. We need to offer the real thing, and the real thing is Jesus Christ. We need to frequently remind our flocks of this truth because people forget in the midst of their struggles. In reminding others, we also remind ourselves – and we need that.

I'm think of the opening lines of the hymn *In Christ Alone*.

*In Christ alone my hope is found,
He is my light, my strength, my song.
This Cornerstone, this solid Ground,
Firm through the fiercest drought and storm.
What heights of love, what depths of peace,
When fears are stilled, when strivings cease!
My Comforter, My All in All,
Here in the love of Christ I stand.*

We should sing songs like this often and with conviction. Oh, that it would be true in our lives!

There you have it – a brief list of some of the best things church leaders can give. Your list may be different than mine – but having a list to guide us gives us clarity and helps us execute on our good intentions. What's on your list? 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.*

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/something-to-talk-about-archives/>