

Something to Talk About

A conversation guide for church leaders

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Clarity Is Our Friend

This summer my wife and I took an 11-day road trip from Southern California to Northern Washington to visit my son and his family. We spent three days with the family and the other eight days on the road. Did I mention COVID19? It was an interesting trip.

I like road trips. I like scenery. I like driving. I like conversations with my wife and even the long, peaceful and satisfying pauses and silence between them. I like the break in routine that enables me to think my thoughts – some familiar and pleasant, and some invasive and challenging.

But there were some things I didn't like. I didn't particularly like wearing a mask everywhere we went. I didn't like that park visitor centers and facilities were closed. I didn't like restaurants being closed to indoor dining (shivering during a nighttime outdoor dining experience in coastal Oregon was memorable, but not necessarily pleasant).

But there was one thing that I found particularly annoying. It was a highway road sign. It appeared mostly on highways with speed limits of 65 or 70 miles per hour. It was a warning sign, square but displayed as a diamond and usually safety-for-all orange in color. It contained but one word.

SLOW

As I drove by this sign, it metaphorically yelled at me, "SLOW!" But it didn't tell me what it wanted me to actually do. Slow to what? Slow for what? Was I supposed to slow to a particular speed – if so what speed? Was I supposed to be looking out for some danger – if so, what danger? Where was the danger? How long before I encountered it? My mind screamed, "What do you want me to do?" even as I eased, just a bit, off the accelerator.

The sign got me to thinking about communication and leading. So often we leaders try to communicate with others, but we lack clarity. I'm sure the road department put the "SLOW" sign there for a reason, but we drivers don't know why, so it's actually not very helpful. It doesn't tell us what we are supposed to do.

One of my favorite sayings and exhortations to leaders is, “Clarity is our friend.” Clarity is helpful to leaders and followers; “...how will anyone know what tune is being played unless there is distinction in the notes? If the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle?”¹ If we truly want to lead people, and if we truly want to influence their behaviors, then clarity is something to talk about.

Here are some areas in which, often by personal experience, I have found clarity to be important but frequently lacking. You may want to use these examples to jumpstart your own conversation about clarity.

- Mission, core values, and key strategies. Most organizations I have been a part of or worked with lacked clarity in describing their mission (why we exist), core values (what’s most important in how we think and behave), and key strategies (the few things we *must* do in this season to accomplish the mission and live out the core values). In fact, most churches don’t even describe them. We use vague Christian jargon such as “reach the world for Christ” or “make disciples” but people, including many leaders, don’t know what we mean by those phrases. What does “making disciples” look like in your church? What do we mean by the words “reaching” and “the world?” A lack of clarity in the words we use can cause leaders to miss the mark and followers to go astray or never even get started.²
- Sermons. I listen to a lot of sermons, even more since so many churches have put their sermons on-line. Most of those sermons do not lack clarity in their exposition of scripture. The lack of clarity is in their application of scripture. In other words, the exposition was great, but what do you want me to do? What action should I take in light of what you just showed me in the scripture? It saddens me that so many pastors put so much effort into preaching a sermon that will be heard once and will never be thought about again; not because it isn’t important, but because we didn’t tell people what we want them to do with it. After we’ve preached our hearts out, do we tell people how we want them to respond? One proven method for keeping a sermon alive longer to allow it to sink in is to have the sermon, or at least a review of the sermon, as the topic of small group meetings. Another may be to digitally send reminders of the teaching throughout the week. You can probably think of other strategies that would work in your ministry context.
- Roles and responsibilities in teams. A lack of clarity here is a frequent cause of friction among staff and ministry teams. It may be as simple as clearly determining who does what. It may be as simple as defining what “lanes” individuals drive in and providing clear direction as to how to get invited to help in another person’s “lane.” Do you have conflict or annoyance between team members? Clarity is likely needed, either regarding roles and relationships or how to behave.
- Relationships between pastors and elders/board members. Unmet expectations about the responsibilities and relationships between the lead/senior pastor and elders/board

¹ 1 Corinthians 14:7-8 (NIV) – the context is speaking in tongues, but the point is still true.

² EFCA West can help you work toward clarity in these things. Contact Bob at bob.osborne@efca.org

members is a frequent source of conflict among church leadership teams. When I get invited into these situations, I almost always find that the parties in conflict are not sharing the same assumptions regarding who does what and how to relate to one another. This is usually because the relational and operational expectations have never been clearly established (which means, in this case, written down). At the end of elder/board meetings, do you recap what was decided and who will be doing what? Do the pastor and elders have the same expectations and assumptions about their relationships with one another? How will *you* know if *they* know without talking about it? It might be an awkward conversation initially, but an awkward conversation now is better than a battle down the road.

- Staff oversight of volunteers. Years ago, I was asked to help in the ministry to high school students by being a mid-week small group leader. I had a very time-consuming job and worked in other areas in the church but agreed to do so because there was a need, I loved our student ministries pastor and I had sons in the larger group. I figured I could at least barely fit that in and would give it a try. Unfortunately, over time, I discovered that the “committed” small group leader also attended the Sunday evening youth gathering, youth outings and events, made weekly phone calls to those in the small group, and hung out individually with a student every week or so. So, I quit. I still love our former student ministries pastor and don’t blame this on him, but I lacked clarity about the ministry I was undertaking when I started – I should have asked more questions and he should have been more clear about the expectations at the beginning. And I needed to have asked about it when the role expanded into previously unknown expectations. Perhaps my mid-week-only participation would have been enough. Are your volunteers clear on what we want them to do? How would we know?

These are but a few areas in churches where clarity is frequently missing. How about you and your church? What would you remove or add to the list? Where does the lack of clarity result in confusion or conflict or uncertainty? You’ll know better if you talk about it. Because “clarity is our friend.” And clarity is 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/church-leadership/> or <https://efcawest.efcadistrict.org/something-to-talk-about-archives/>.