

# Something to Talk About

## A conversation guide for church leaders

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### Are We Asking the Wrong Question?

Among the responsibilities of the leadership community of a local church are evaluating and strategizing. I've found it difficult to evaluate or strategize with the degree of excellence I desire without investing significant time looking for data from sources beyond my own knowledge and experience and that of my leadership partners. Too often, some leaders bring nothing to the table other than what they already have – sometimes not growing at all during their leadership tenure.

Some things I have found extremely helpful for me in this regard, and that I often recommend to other leaders, is to attend conferences and seminars, meet with leaders from other churches, read books, and plug into various podcasts, blogs and other “topic of the day” commentaries.

A problem we have today is that we can choose who we want to listen to, and this often results in our having intellectual interactions with only people that think and believe just like us. For example, I used to say I read a “good book” when the author agreed with what I believed and valued. I've learned, however, that I can also use the “good book” label even when I disagree with its content – if it is well-written and makes me think more deeply on the topic.

There are potential pitfalls, however, into which a consumer of conferences, books, internet fodder and such things may fall. You see, we often find ourselves consuming data only from leaders of large, “successful” church ministries to the exclusion of data from people that are engaged in fruitful ministry in much more humble circumstances. We can fall into the trap of assuming that “big” and “great” are the same thing – and they are not.

When we buy into the “it's big and well known so it must be great” fallacy, whether intentionally or accidentally, we can find ourselves listening to speakers and reading books and asking ourselves “what made it big?” instead of “is it great, and what made it that way?” We end up asking the wrong question.

There are far too many examples of big churches that were not or are not great churches. And we seldom, if ever, recognize and celebrate great churches that are not big churches. That's a shame, and it's something to talk about.

Are you and your co-leaders asking the right questions when you evaluate ministries and strategize? Here are some ideas to facilitate your conversation.

- What are the conferences you attend and the books you are reading? Who is speaking into your leadership life by what means? What have you learned from them? Are you hearing any perspectives on ministry issues that are not fully aligned with your own? If so, what have you learned from that?
- In general, what do you believe to be the essential attributes of every "great" church? How does our ministry measure up against that standard? Where are we strong and where are we weak?
- Big can be measured in an instant, but greatness is established over time. Consider some churches and organizations that grew big but were not great. What prevented them from becoming great or sustaining greatness? What was the cost of them growing big but not great?
- Most church leaders want their church to grow – not necessarily to become huge, but to at least grow. Look at your church's growth strategies. Are our strategies rooted in becoming greater or in growing bigger? Do our behaviors and strategies hint that we value big more than great?

Don't get me wrong. I love conferences and I love hearing from well-known, amazing church leaders. But when I take that stuff back to the church in which I serve as a leader, I need to ask the right questions. It's really easy to ask the wrong questions and pursue the wrong strategies because our culture – yes, our church culture, too – tends to confuse popular and big and with greatness and it's harder to become and sustain great than to become bigger. For me, I'd rather be able to say that I am part of a great church than part of a big church. How about you?

Great churches don't just have great leaders – they grow great Christians. And 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/>.*