

SOMETHING TO TALK ABOUT

A conversation guide for church leaders

When the Unthinkable Happens

Church leaders don't think much about the unthinkable because it's, well, unthinkable. But we should because unthinkable things may not have happened in our church, but they do happen in other churches. Next time, it might be us.

The student ministries staff is on a weekend winter retreat with the youth group. The mountain cabin and recent snowfall are just what the doctor ordered for a great student ministries winter retreat. On Saturday, the students and staff are enjoying the snow and planning for some impromptu snow sliding when the youth pastor's wife slides down the hill, hits a tree head on, and dies despite efforts of CPR and resuscitation by some of the staff on scene. The youth group watches this unfold. She also is a church employee leading the worship team and directing the children's ministry. The unthinkable, the unimaginable has just happened.

Yes, this is a true story, and it happened a few weeks ago to Hillside Community Church, our EFCA West church in Porterville, California. Our hearts ache for the trauma and grief that this church is experiencing – the staff, the ministry teams, the students, the parents, and the church as well as the devastated family.

And you are the lead pastor. What now?¹

It's pretty much impossible to plan for a specific unthinkable event because it is unthinkable. But there are general principles and protocols that church leaders can adopt to help them lead well when the unthinkable happens.

For leaders who bear the responsibility of shepherding congregations through unthinkable circumstances, tremendous grief, and traumatic events, there is great value in thinking through such things before they occur so that we don't have to think about all those details in the midst of the stress and heavy workload of leading through a crisis. This month's article can help your leadership team do this. It's clearly something to talk about.

There are two categories of events addressed in this article. One is the injury or death of a member of the congregation that occurs away from the church and congregation. The other is the injury or death of a person occurring on the church campus or during a church event whether on or off campus. Other types of emergency preparedness and response have been addressed in prior Something to Talk About articles (December 2014, January 2015, January 2018, June 2018). The principles apply to most any significant unpleasant event.

¹ This story is shared with you in this article with the express permission of Hillside Community Church. We encourage you to add this church and the people involved to your long-term prayer list as the grief and consequences will be felt for a long time.

One significant difference between the two types of incidents is the number of people witnessing the event (the “personally involved” factor). Another is how well known throughout the church the person may be. Regardless of these things, however, those experiencing the trauma will experience grief and individuals experience and deal with grief in many different ways. Yet trauma and grief personally impacting a large group in the church has a deeper and longer-term impact in the church.

Learning the basics about how people address grief and trauma and how to care for a person(s) experiencing grief and trauma is an important piece of preparedness for every church. EFCA West can help you accomplish this important training for your staff or church. Reach out to us at efcawest@efca.org for more information.

This article’s emphasis is upon things church leaders need to discuss and decide to lead well and care for people well when such events happen. Here are some ideas that may fuel your conversation.

- Do the members of your leadership team, including small group leaders and volunteer leaders and helpers in ministries, know who they should notify of any injury or significant event and when they need to make such notifications? Who are the people that need to be trained in who and when to notify a leader of a significant event? Here are some ideas to consider:
 - Identify one person and one or two alternates to be notified if the primary person is not available. Recognize that “notification” means actually reaching the person, not leaving a text, voicemail, or email that does not receive an acknowledgement. The person(s) to be notified should be well-known within the church.
 - If possible, the primary person to be notified should be staff, not a board member (there may be exceptions based upon the size or other unique characteristic of a church).
 - Notification should be immediate, not later that evening or tomorrow, but now. “Immediate” means as soon as you possibly can. It is important that those persons tasked with managing and responding to significant events be afforded the opportunity to provide direction and input as soon as possible. It is better to do things right in the first place than have to change course down the road.
- Who else needs to know? It’s one thing to make the required notification to the designated person, it’s another thing for that person to know who he/she should notify in turn. Here are some suggestions.
 - Notify your insurance carrier as soon as possible of any serious (needing medical care beyond a bandage) injury or death or potential liability situation. You don’t need all the information to make an initial notification. Review your insurance policy to become aware of any specific notification requirements and procedures for your policy. Post phone numbers.
 - Next, notify church board/elders and staff. This is a “heads up” notification in case they get calls or other inquiries. Because of their roles and responsibilities, these persons generally have a need to know and a right to know.
 - In a major incident or serious injury/death situation, plot a course of action to notify the congregation about the situation being careful to not give more information than warranted or legal, and not giving personal medical or other information about participants except as required and with the permission of family (no names of minors). The congregation needs to eventually know that something happened, but do not need all the details. It’s often not wise to “wait until Sunday” for at least two reasons: 1) if your services are on-line, you may give information to the public that is not public information, and 2) in the absence of timely information, people make stuff up, and the made-up stuff is generally inaccurate and assumes the worst.

- If there is a serious injury/death to an employee, you likely need to notify your state and perhaps local government's OSHA organization. We serve too many churches in too many states to give this information to everyone and laws change too frequently to keep it up to date, so hit your state and local websites to get this information. Oftentimes, states require business entities to post these reporting requirements in a conspicuous place on site.
- Call or email someone at EFCA West. Our contact information is on our Website (www.efcawest.org). This will afford us the opportunity to share lessons learned from other churches throughout the district and perhaps help you navigate the season to come.
- Write it down and share it with people that need to know. If this type of information is not written down and kept up-to-date, it is not followed when the crisis hits. The information needs to be posted in a conspicuous place so that it is seen frequently. How do we ensure that those that need to follow this policy know that they need to do so? How might people access it when it is needed?
- Review it often. As I wrote in a prior article, things that go without saying don't get said and things that don't get said don't get done. I encourage a twice yearly reminder be sent to all persons that would need to know how to initially handle and report an "unthinkable" event. Those present are often in shock, and people in shock forget obscure details that are not frequently reminded.
- Who will serve as "spokesperson" for the church for internal (your congregation) and external inquiries (think media, lawyers, random people, government agencies, etc.)? You may have one person handle both types of inquiry and you may have one for each, but have one. You may need to have an alternate(s) if the primary spokesperson is on vacation or cannot be reached. Train people not to be ad hoc spokespersons just because they received an inquiry – refer inquiries to the spokesperson(s).

As always, the EFCA West team is here to help you and your team navigate troubled waters. Don't hesitate to reach out as we are here to serve God by serving you.

We at EFCA West praise God for the life and ministry of Calli Piper and pray for her husband Jon and Hillside Community Church in Porterville as they lead and live in the profound grief of this tragedy. Please take a moment to add them to your prayer list.

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://efca-west.districts.efca.org/something-to-talk-about-archives>.