

# Something to Talk About

## A conversation guide for church leaders

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### Can We Be Trusted?

*Note: 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/>.

Church leaders, can we be trusted?

Trustworthiness is one of the most, if not *the* most, important of character qualities for those who lead others – at least those who would lead by example and influence rather than by compulsion and force. Unfortunately, we have seen many high-profile and lower-profile examples of Christian leaders who have proven to be untrustworthy and have made shipwreck of their lives, harmed their churches, and damaged the reputation of Jesus Christ.

The trustworthiness of some Christian leaders has been found lacking in issues of financial impropriety and fraud, sexual misconduct, and the failure to address or, worse, covering up the misconduct of others in order to protect one's reputation, the situation that has plagued the Roman Catholic church for several years now. Recently, the Southern Baptist Convention has been called to task for not being proactive in taking measures to address ministerial misconduct within the autonomous member churches of their tribe. Who will be next? Your church? Your denomination or association?

The many allegations and actual instances of misconduct and/or institutional neglect in dealing with it have resulted in questions among many about whether church leaders can be trusted to do the right thing personally as well as when someone within the church or tribe is found to have engaged in untrustworthy conduct. "Can we be trusted?" is a question raised by many within and without our churches and is definitely something to talk about.

It is quite easy for us church leaders to gather together, talk about trust, and come to the conclusion that we are trustworthy. It is quite another thing to consider whether those we lead and outsiders would consider us trustworthy. It's still another thing to consider together what

we are doing to earn and maintain trust and what might we be doing that is already or potentially damaging to having others know us to be trustworthy. Let me provide some fodder to fuel your conversation.

- In my experience, there seems to be more instances of violations of trust among longer-tenured church leaders than rookie leaders. Has this been your experience? If true, what might be some of the causes of this? Are there areas where longer-tenured leaders tend to cut corners, stop paying attention, or unnecessarily put the trust they have earned at risk? How might we mitigate or stop this?
- Many leaders in churches and other organizations fall due to financial improprieties. What controls do we have in place to guard against this? How often should we have an independent (meaning not connected to the church or its leaders) audit of our finances and financial controls? Should our pastor handle money? How do we ensure that our leaders are following our financial controls?
- Sexual misconduct, especially involving children, is catastrophic to the testimony of a church. Do we have policies and procedures in place that give clear direction to staff on how to minister to children? What are they, and when did we last train people or remind people of them?
- Have certain phrases found their way into our vocabulary that call into question our own truthfulness? Phrases such as, “to tell you the truth,” or “truthfully speaking” or “let me be honest with you” can give a listener cause to wonder if we are telling the truth when we don’t start a sentence with those phrases. Why do we use such phrases?
- Do we overhype some things that prove to not be true? Do we fudge attendance figures? Do we bill events as “amazing” and “life changing” that are in reality beneficial yet quite average? Do we sell changes in programming or direction under the guise of “God has led me to...” when we cannot describe how God supernaturally led us to do so? Do we use God to bolster our own decisions?
- When we explain things to our congregation or to dissenters, do we mince words? Do we hold cards close to the vest? Or do we exude clarity, confidence and full disclosure?
- Make a list of things leaders do that build trust and things that leaders do that damage trust. How are we doing personally and as a team of leaders in building trust and avoiding damaging it?
- Have I or our leadership team done anything in recent history that has damaged trust? How can I or we make amends and start the process of rebuilding trust.

Years ago, I worked in the county jail. At the end of our shift we had to exit through a sally-port, a gated entrance that has two gates, one on either side of a space between them, that were configured in such a way that only one gate could be open at a time. The inner door would open to allow a number of us to congregate in the entry way, and then we would have to wait for the gate behind us to close before the exit gate in front of us could be opened. We hated standing there after a long workday waiting for gates to open and close. When folk would complain, we were reminded that security, by design, is inconvenient. The same holds true for building and maintaining behaviors and systems that build and support trust – they can

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be inconvenient, but are very necessary. Those who have lost the trust of their followers know too well that enduring those inconveniences would have been worth it to avoid having disqualified themselves from ministry and tarnishing their reputation.

Are we willing to do the work and endure the inconvenience of being trustworthy to build trust? Can we be trusted? Should we be trusted? Am I trustworthy? That's something to talk about.

*Let us know if we can help and how your conversation goes.  
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