

# SOMETHING TO TALK ABOUT

A conversation guide for church leaders

## A Christmas Story

When I was a young boy, one of our Christmas traditions was to gather at my paternal grandparents' home with the extended family (a gazillion of us) for Christmas dinner. It seemed more like a very late lunch to younger me, but after dinner we would open presents – lots of presents. It is a great memory.

One year, I received a toy that I really wanted for Christmas. It was called “Mr. Machine” and consisted of 44 plastic parts that, when properly assembled, would create the wind-up toy pictured. It came assembled in the box and it worked just fine after I opened it. The arms and legs moved, the jaws opened and shut, the wheels turned, and it made a cool machine-noise sound. But the best thing about Mr. Machine is that one could take it apart and reassemble it.



Did I mention that this was a family gathering? I am the middle of three children in my family – there's an older brother and a younger sister and we span only five years apart. My bold, inquisitive, and daring older brother wanted to disassemble the toy at my grandparent's home. Being more cautious, less bold, and taking a more reasoned and conservative approach to life even at that early age, I shunned the bold and daring suggestion of taking Mr. Machine apart then and there preferring to do so in the more quiet and orderly atmosphere of the day after Christmas at our home lest something get lost amid the hubbub at our grandparents' home.

Older brother, being bigger, older, and more experienced at persuasion than I was at resisting it, won the day and he took it apart then and there.

You already know the end of the story. Forty-three of the forty-four parts made it home, and the one part that was missing and never found was essential to Mr. Machine's ability to do what Mr. Machine was created to do. The hours of fun I had expected to have playing with Mr. Machine turned into just a few moments and I was left with hunks of useless though colorful plastic pieces.

I have no bitterness over this.

Why bother sharing this story with you? Because it's a Christmas story and this is December and that's what one does. But there is more. As I recently recalled this event in my life, I found that there were lots of things that it brought to mind that church leadership teams might find worth talking about and fun to talk about, too. Here are some ideas.

- It's interesting how so many of my brother's and my personality traits were very apparent at such a young age. These differences have served us well throughout our lives in our families and our chosen careers. There are so many personality traits among those that comprise our leadership teams including ministry staff and church board members. This diversity can be an amazing asset, but only if the differences are understood and appreciated. At our church, a number of years ago, our elders did two exercises together – each told their life story in 8 minutes or less and we reviewed our MBTI scores and results. We learned so much about one another in the process but, more important than that, we grew to appreciate the many differences among us. Why not give it a try? It can be a fun thing to do during a leadership retreat, too.
- Mr. Machine came home with 43 brand new parts that worked exceptionally well. But part #44 was missing and derailed all that Mr. Machine had been created to do. Churches can be like that, having lots of fully functional parts but missing the one or few things that would make the enterprise go. What are the key parts of your church that make it go? What are the key components of your leadership team that make it work? Do they get the leadership care and attention they need and deserve? Are there some parts that we work hard to keep that aren't actually all that important to proper functioning? How I wish Mr. Machine's plastic nose had been the missing part. Consider spending some time together talking about each team member's thinking on which parts are essential and which parts might be optional – not for the purposes of coming up with a “correct” answer list (though that might follow), but for the purposes of learning from and getting to better know one another on the team.

Along this same line, I recently presented a sermon from Joshua chapter five relating to God commanding the men to be circumcised before setting off to defeat Jericho. They were prepared for battle, but God knew that something was missing – obedience to His command that they be circumcised. The battle had to wait. Is there something missing that we need to take care of before we should expect God's blessing in our lives or our work? Might our missing part be some kind of sin or disobedience?

- I thought Mr. Machine would make me happy, but he didn't. In fact, he became pretty useless shortly after I had acquired him. Life is sometimes like that – we work really hard to obtain that which we believe we really want only to find that it does not satisfy or result in happiness. I mourned the loss of Mr. Machine for a day or two (I may have been angry at my brother, too) but I quickly moved on. Mr. Machine did nothing to increase my joy in life, the photo of the deliriously happy boy on the box notwithstanding. Are there things related to the church we serve that we covet? If only we had or could do (fill in the blank) our church would be great and I would be happy. If only we had a band –oops – worship team like that church down the street. If only we had more space. If only we had more or better

facilities. If only we had better leaders. The “if only” list never ends – and they don’t satisfy when we get them. Once we get an “if only” we quickly covet another. Consider having a time of quiet introspection asking yourself what “if only” desires you might be clinging to rather than finding joy and happiness with what has been provided for you already. Don’t let “if only” steal your joy.

Christmas celebrates the time when an angel of the Lord appeared to the shepherds saying, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.”<sup>1</sup> The good news of Jesus Christ is cause for great joy. Our joy is in Jesus; our joy is from Jesus. Our joy is not in our things; it is in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

That childhood Christmas disappointment taught me much. And I’m still learning from it. Thanks, bro.

My all who bear the burden of leadership in the church have a very merry Christmas filled with the joy of our salvation. “For unto you is born this day, in the City of David, a Savior which is Christ the Lord.”<sup>2</sup>

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

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 2:10 (NIV)

<sup>2</sup> Luke 2:11 (KJV)