

# Something to Talk About

## A conversation guide for church leaders

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### What Do We Do Now?

I'm so glad that 2020 is over! What a year!

Turning the page on the last month of the year and opening the books on a new calendar year has some emotional impact. How else can we explain the hooting and hollering, fireworks, parades, a half-dozen college football games, and a gazillion people standing in Times Square waiting for some glass thing to meander down the side of a building?

But that was some other year. This year we still have COVID. This year we still have disputes, dissensions and divisions. This year we still have the prior president and not the new one and the attendant hoopla. And that Times Square thing will certainly have been different.

Our good intentions and resolutions aside, the annual transition from one year to the next isn't really all that dramatic. In relationship to December 31, January 1 is just "tomorrow." Yet we long for a different kind of year – a better year than the one that has just ended. We like the *feeling* of turning that page.

There are some things that church leaders should be talking about at this time of transition from 2020 to 2021. The conversations we have at the start of this year can set the course for an amazing year of ministry or another year of crises, divisions and annoyances. Let me suggest to you a few things that might be helpful as you gather your leaders and teams and think of something to talk about.

- What will be our focus this year? There are lots of potential areas of focus for church leaders in 2021 including technology use and improvements, how to care for a scattered membership, how to have people "engage" and measure engagement, addressing community and social issues, programming revisions and the like. Let me suggest something to talk about first. Let's have a conversation about how we leaders and the congregations that we lead can focus more and better on Jesus. I'm taken by the simplicity of the command of Hebrews 12:1-3 to throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles and to run with perseverance the race before us, *fixing our eyes on Jesus*. We do this, keeping in mind the opposition Jesus faced from sinners, so that we will not grow weary and lose heart. Brothers and sisters – so many church leaders are tired and losing

heart. Let us not become a statistic. How can we as leaders and our congregations fix our eyes on Jesus and put aside the other stuff that weighs us down and trips us up? What are those things?

- Politics has felt particularly harsh and polarized in recent years, ever so much more so during 2020's election cycle, and these divisions continue and are felt in the church. Should we smile, nod and humor those exhibiting symptoms of political divisiveness in our churches in hope that it will somehow just go away, or should we teach our congregations and ourselves about what it means to be in the world yet not of it and to be God's representatives – His ambassadors – for His kingdom and not for worldly kingdoms? How do we redirect sheep that have wandered off track and are seeking to change our focus from Christ to the world? How will the people we lead learn about being salt and light and Ambassadors for God's kingdom if we don't teach them? Perhaps this is something for us to talk about with our teams and in our congregations.
- Does it bother us that when the world thinks or speaks about "Christians" they seem to think more about Christian's political leanings (left and right, but right seems to get the bad press these days) and our demands to exercise our constitutional rights to gather indoors in large numbers than in how much our behaviors reflect our love for Jesus Christ? We are faced with many decisions about which we must make nuanced application of Biblical teaching. Yet, there are many clear commands and teachings of Jesus that Christians should be expected to follow such as: Loving God with all you have and your neighbor as yourself; placing the needs of others before your own; pursuing justice, mercy and demonstrating peace; being humble; living a life that shows the fruit of the Spirit; going and making disciples of those who are not yet disciples; seeking God's kingdom and His righteousness above all else; and treating others the way we ourselves would want to be treated. Would it benefit the flock we lead and the Church as a whole for its leaders to train their flocks on how to be followers of Jesus in these difficult times?
- I find it irritating when someone wanting to take me to task for being cautious about exposing my congregation and community to COVID who asks, "What are you afraid of?" The question always seems to be asked in a condescending, judgmental way that infers that I and like-minded church leaders are cowards. Yet, if asked with purer and more thoughtful intentions, this is actually an excellent question for us to ask ourselves and something to talk about. What are we afraid of? I am not afraid of roadways, but I look both ways several times before crossing them and I don't use them as a playground. I'm not afraid of knives – well, maybe I am and with good reason. Mature people don't do unwise things merely to prove their lack of fear and especially when their decisions affect other people's lives. Are we fearful of bringing shame to Jesus by our own arrogance or indifference toward others? Are we fearful that the church cannot be the church or Christians cannot have the relational support they need without sitting at least weekly in a room with 300-1000 other people? Are we fearful that our ability to be salt and light in a dark world may be damaged by the decisions we make? Are we fearful that ignoring safety protocols may lead to needless death and disease among the flock we are supposed to be caring for? Are we fearful that disputes about how to respond to COVID may be Satan's tool to distract and destroy us? In case you may be wondering, I'm not afraid of our government. Having clear, concise and

honest answers to the “what are you afraid of?” question is something to talk about – and the answers are something to write down and remember and share when asked.

- I want people to like me. Most pastors I know want to be liked, too. Our problem is when we sacrifice speaking clearly to a fellow believer’s ungodly behavior because we don’t want to create conflict and want to be liked. I need to keep reminding myself that not addressing the problem does not prevent conflict because the conflict already exists. What it does is allow the ungodly behavior to continue or, perhaps worse, cause the offender to think that we condone or even support their behavior. I guess that’s the reason that so many times in scripture leaders are encouraged or commanded to be strong and courageous. It’s much easier to be strong and courageous in difficult times when we know that others have our back. This is why difficult issues are something to talk about. Discussion of the difficult things we and other leaders are facing with a supportive leadership team and/or elders/board members is so important. Lead pastors so often feel all alone as they face the giants in their path. What are the giants we face? How can we work together to address them with Biblical conviction, strength and courage?

I often suggest that church leaders consider having a different kind of staff meeting or elder/board meeting at the beginning of a new year. There are so many things that we should talk about, and they are typically crowded out by the ordinary business of the day. It may now be more important than ever to have a conversation about these and other significant issues that we will face as we seek to follow Christ and care for the people entrusted to our oversight in the coming year.

*“Don’t have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels. And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Opponents must be gently instructed, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will.” (2 Timothy 2:23-26, NIV)*

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

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*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/something-to-talk-about-archives/>.*