

# SOMETHING TO TALK ABOUT

A conversation guide for church leaders

## How Do We Decide That a Door Is “Open”?

I listen to several sermons most every week. My brother is a preacher. My younger son Steve is a preacher. And I often listen to sermons involving churches where I am or will soon be providing services. I listen to lots of sermons.

A few weeks back I was listening to the message my son was preaching at the church where he serves. You know your children are grown when they say something that strikes you as profound that you didn't tell them years ago and that you had not thought of before. My son is grown. His text that struck me is I Corinthians 16:8-9. Paul is expressing his desire to come and spend some time with the Corinthian church, and then writes this:

*<sup>8</sup>But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, <sup>9</sup>for a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.” (ESV)*

My son pointed out that Paul considered the ministry door in Ephesus to be wide open despite the opposition he was facing there. Though he faced many adversaries, Paul considered staying in Ephesus to be a wide-open door for effective work. That was an “aha” moment for me in a passage I have so often skimmed past. In considering whether a door of ministry opportunity is open or closed, the presence of significant opposition is a door-slammer for me. For me the decision matrix formula usually looks like this:

*Opportunity + Opposition = Closed Door*

For Paul, at least in this situation, the formula looked like this:

*Opportunity + Opposition = Wide Open Door*

This got me thinking: How do church leaders (including me) determine whether the door to a potential ministry opportunity is open or closed? And because evaluating ministry opportunities is one of the key things that leaders do, how we decide whether a door is open or closed is something to talk about.

It has been my experience over the past nine years with EFCA West that most church leaders (including me) make door-open/door-closed determinations fairly frequently without significant consideration of the decision-making framework they use to make those determinations. When leaders make such decisions on a case-by-case basis without having a

framework we use to make those assessments, we are basically flying by the seat of our pants rather than utilizing sound decision-making processes to guide or validate our decisions.

Most decisions we make fit into one of these three general categories.

1. The no-brainer “yes.” These decisions are easy. Lots of obvious benefit for no significant risk. They decide themselves, assuming we have evaluated them correctly. Usually, boards are involved in these decisions only because of a legal or policy issue or as a report of something to be aware of.
2. The no-brainer “no.” These decisions also are easy. There is no useful benefit and clear, significant risk to the church. There is little if anything to be gained at significant likelihood of meaningful loss. Usually, boards are not involved in these decisions because the ideas are so bad that they don’t make it that far.
3. The maybe-yes/maybe-no decision. These decisions are harder than the others because of their uncertainty of success and uncertainty regarding potential negative consequences. The question usually asked is whether the potential ministry benefits are worth the potential ministry or relational costs of making that decision. This is where church leaders have their leadership chops tested. The stereotypical church-isms pronounced during these deliberations include comments such as “Are we going to step out in faith?” and “Let’s be strong and courageous” and “The wise man measures the cost” and “Let’s move forward until the Lord closes the door.” Stereotypical church-isms are so unhelpful.

How might we know when or if “the Lord closes the door?” Here are some ideas to start your conversation about open and closed doors.

- What role should potential opposition play in our decision making? Does it matter from whom the opposition comes or whether it is internal or external to the church?
- What is our strategy when leadership is convinced of the Scriptural rightness of a decision about which significant opposition is expected?
- What is the work of the Holy Spirit in guiding our decisions about difficult issues? How can we be sure it is the Holy Spirit rather than our own opinions, paradigms, and desires?
- Make a list of potential indicators of an “open door” and a list of potential indicators of a “closed door.”
- How do we differentiate between decisions that are “permanent” and those that allow us to “try” something new? Do we have a history of “trying” new things or of making ministry decisions as though they must be “permanent?” How far past the “open door” decision must we travel before deciding it isn’t working and it’s time to consider that door “closed?” Should we build in exit ramps on major decisions?

- It has been said that God's will has both a *what* and a *when*. How do we decide how long we will sit outside a closed door while awaiting it to open?

The open/closed-door metaphor has a lot going for it, but it is also a metaphor and metaphors have their limits. The question of what factors we will use in making these decisions remains. Do we fly by the seat of our pants each time or is there a framework that we can create and use to help guide our discussion so that we can make the best decision possible under the circumstances? Unity among leaders, you see, is the outcome of a great decision-making process. Our goal is to make the best possible decision under the circumstances and having done so, to unite around it.

Thanks, Steve, for giving me something to think about and for giving church leaders 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://efca-west.districts.efca.org/something-to-talk-about-archives>.*