

Something to Talk About

A conversation guide for church leaders

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Are You My Pastor?

Among the sometimes awkward relationships we humans have are those between a pastor¹ and church board members and between a pastor and the staff members he leads. This is because a pastor carries with him multiple roles within these relationships, and staff and board members have multiple roles related to their pastor. Let me explain.

The pastor's relationship with board members is mostly twofold. He is a fellow board member and he is their pastor. Similarly, a board member has a twofold relationship with the pastor. The pastor is my peer as a board member, and he is my pastor, too.

It is similar for the pastor's relationships with staff members. He is their supervisor and leader, and he is their pastor. And, for a staff member, the pastor is my boss and he is also my pastor.

Because these relationships sometimes feel like they are in conflict with one another and can occasionally erupt into significant conflict, having clarity about how these relationships interact and how we want to behave toward one another in our roles is something to talk about.

My wife occasionally shares with me frustrating (and sometimes comical) situations she faces in the workplace. I am a problem solver by nature and vocation. I have often failed to exhibit the behaviors she desires because I have assumed the role of problem solver when what she wanted was to relate with me. Over the years I have found it helpful to sometimes just ask a clarifying question: "Are you looking for a suggestion from me or are we relating with each other?" In relationships, clarity is our friend.

It's important to remember that pastors, board members and staff members cannot dis-integrate themselves by discarding one or more of the roles they have. If you are a pastor, you cannot just shut that off. Neither can the board or staff member. But, we can choose how we are going to behave in a given situation and whether our dominant behavior in a given situation will be as pastor, as supervisor, as board member, as staff member, or as a congregant.

¹ Throughout this article the word "pastor" refers to the lead/senior pastor. The principles may also apply to subordinate pastoral staff as well.

In my experience, unmet expectations are the number one cause of relational conflict. Author Pete Scazzero, in his book *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, provided helpful insights into whether our expectations of others are valid or invalid by writing that valid expectations must be:

- Conscious – I have to become aware of the expectations I have for the other person
- Realistic – I have to ask myself if my expectations regarding the other person are realistic
- Spoken – I have to communicate my expectations clearly, directly, and respectfully to the other person, and
- Agreed upon – in order for my expectations to be valid, the other person must be aware of and agree to them.

Pastor, board member, and staff member: What are your expectations about the pastor's role in your relationships? Here are some ideas that may help you start the conversation.

- For pastor/board member relationships:
 - Pastor, talk about any tension you may feel or have felt in honoring and living out both your roles of pastor and fellow board member. Board members, talk about any tension you may feel or have felt in relating to your pastor as a board member and as your pastor.
 - In meetings with board members as a group, I usually suggest pastors embrace the role of fellow board member or teammate, albeit a board member/teammate with unique experience, skills, gifts and responsibilities. Do you agree or disagree and why? Have a conversation about how hard it may be for a pastor to wear the "board member" hat and how for board members it can be harder to disagree with your pastor than with other board members.
 - What leadership behaviors and roles does the board want from the pastor? What leadership behaviors and roles does the pastor want to live out with the board?
 - It may be easy to envision how the pastor can be the pastor to an individual board member, but how might the pastor shepherd the entire board? What does the pastor want to provide in the way of shepherding, and what are the board members looking for from him? When do shepherds need shepherding?
- For pastor/staff member relationships:
 - When does a supervision issue become a pastoral issue? Are both roles always in play? If not, how does a pastor or staff member differentiate between the two roles in real time? Should we self-disclose the role we are playing?
 - Do staff members actually have the freedom to meet with the pastor as his/her shepherd without it carrying over into his role as supervisor? How can the staff member communicate the dominant relationship role he/she wants the pastor to play in a given situation?
 - Do we have workplace rules that inhibit the pastor's ability to shepherd staff members and their families? Do any of our rules need to be changed or clarified?

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The lead pastor wears a number of hats, and sometimes finds himself wearing more than one hat at the same time. Each hat is important, and each must be worn at the right time. “Are you my pastor?” is an appropriate question for staff and board members to ask. The correct answer is, “Yes, I am.” Clarity about expectations within the important relationships among pastor, board, and staff is our friend and is 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.

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/>.