

Something to Talk About

A conversation guide for church leaders

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Pastors Are Not Like Beer Cans

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 www.efcawest.org. Click on the Church Leadership tab to get to the archive.

Some time ago, during my policing career, I was attending a leadership seminar during which the facilitator asked participants to “think back about the worst boss you ever had.” I controlled the impulse, but everything within me wanted to jump up, shout “I know who it is and I’ll tell you his name!” and begin reciting my list of personal and organizational abuses by this high-ranking person that immediately came to mind. Perhaps my favorite most-offensive-things-he-did memory is his fondness of saying, “Lieutenants are like beer cans – you pop their tops, drain the contents, crumple them, and throw them away.”

I was a lieutenant, and I was his aide. Good times.

Pastors are not like beer cans. They are not people who come to our churches so we can pop their tops, drain their contents and dispose of them as we will. Yet, all too often, we see pastors who have reached the end of their life season of vocational ministry who cannot or will not retire. These pastors and their leadership teams face very difficult decisions. Oftentimes it seems as though everyone knows that the pastor should retire or at least change roles to one better suited for his stage of life, but things drag on and the church declines. The pastor clings to his work because he cannot afford to retire or change roles. And the pastor, his or her family, and the church suffer.

There are many reasons why tenured and older pastors will not or feel they cannot retire. Some, unfortunately, relate to emotional maturity and health (they are so vested in their pastor role that they have no other self-identity without it); but, oftentimes we see pastors who think they cannot retire because they have inadequate or no retirement savings or plan – they arrive unprepared at this inevitable time of change in their life. When they reach the stage of life and vocation when it’s time to retire or take another seat on the bus, they are afraid to do so

because they cannot afford it financially. And because every pastor ages over time, that's something to talk about.

There is a degree of transparency related to this conversation that may be scary in some churches. In my work I have become aware of many churches where the relationship between pastors and board members is testy or antagonistic at best. Yet, even in those churches this is a conversation that needs to happen – even if it merely confirms that the board actually considers the pastor as a beer can – someone to be used, drained and afterwards discarded; a disposable human resource rather than a person to be valued and cared for.

Here are some suggestions to get your conversation going. Please note that these questions can and should be asked regarding other people who are paid by the church to do ministry. This issue does not apply only to lead/senior pastors.

- Has your pastor opted out of Social Security? If so, what are his retirement income plans and how is he doing in carrying out those plans? If he is in Social Security, what other retirement resources does he have?
- Do we pay our pastor(s) enough that they can be examples to the flock of generosity and planning for the future, or do they barely make enough to get by? I share this with you as one who once thought it was our duty as elders to pay staff as little as possible to demonstrate good stewardship of others' giving – the leadership action that I most regret as I look back on my life. I am not a good steward of the ministry if I don't care for the people as much as for the money.
- Can we leaders talk together about compensation for staff without feeling awkward and tense? If not, where does this tense awkwardness come from? Will we address its root cause to enable us to have open conversations about this, or will we decide to ignore it and hope for the best?
- Should we designate a part of staff compensation packages to be deposited into a retirement account? If so, how much?
- Do we start retirement savings at the time of hire and for younger staff, or do we not get concerned until staff becomes older? Effective retirement planning and saving requires starting early – one's first job is not too soon.
- Do our pastors know that we will not allow them to "linger about" on the payroll or in their current role or pay grade when their ministry is no longer as effective? This may sound harsh, yet many a church conflict arises when the unspoken expectation of the pastor that he will be retained on staff forever and the unspoken expectation of the board that the pastor will not be retained when his ministry effectiveness declines collide. This conversation needs to occur long before the parties need to face this situation.
- What kind of conversation should we have about (and with) ministry staff, especially full-time, whose work is in areas that typically do not last into middle age (such as student ministries, cutting-edge music ministry)? What preparations should be in place

to ease transitions for these people? Whether they move into new ministry vocations in the church or outside the church?

- Are we better able to see success in staff saving for their later years by encouraging them to do so, establishing accountability systems to ensure they are doing so, by directly depositing a salary percentage into a retirement account, or some combination of these? Remember, having good intentions is useless – execution is what matters. If we don't ask about execution, we will not know about it.
- Can our leadership team talk freely about the future for our church, our pastor(s), and our board members? Can we share and talk about our dreams for our futures? If we think we can, do we? If not, why not? Consider scheduling an informal time together to explore one another's dreams.

For as long as we live on planet earth, time will march on. It's inevitable that even the most dynamic young ministers and leaders of churches will over time wither like the grass and fade away. And, it comes fast. Let's not be surprised by that when we get there. Let's not treat our pastors and ministry staff as consumable and disposable resources. Let's value our brothers and sisters in Christ who serve and equip us as their vocation and value them enough to look out for their future welfare. Our pastors are not like beer cans. And that's something to talk about.

Note: Church leaders should seek and follow sound advice from financial and legal professionals in setting up retirement plans, determining tax issues, and all other facets of financial accountability. This article is not intended for use as such advice.

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