

Something to Talk About

A conversation guide for church leaders

By Bob Osborne, EFCA West
Director of Church Health
(bob.osborne@efca.org)

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Should We Call 4-1-1 Now or 9-1-1 Later?

It happened again. And it breaks my heart – every time. Another church. Another pastor. Another team. Another congregation.

Another church in crisis. *Emergency* crisis. My phone rings. E-mails and text messages land in my in-box. The question, sometimes a plaintive cry, is the same, “Can you help us?”

I say, “Yes,” and optimistically offer hope; but sometimes it feels like the real answer should be, “No. I can’t help.” The conflict feels so deep, with battle lines so hardened, and resources so depleted. Sure, we all know that God can do things beyond what we can think, but I often struggle to think of any way to get to a solution that will get this church, these people, on track and on mission for the advancement of God’s kingdom in their neighborhood. Sometimes it works, and sometimes it doesn’t. It’s always really, really hard – and I’m just the consultant. It must be worse for the participating leaders and congregants.

Oh, that the phone calls and emails had started a year or two ago when the symptoms first appeared.

I’m reminded of the many times during my policing career that I or other officers responded to a serious crime and during our canvass for witnesses found someone that had key information, that saw the criminal before the crime, thought it was odd, and decided to not call – “I didn’t want to bother you,” was the excuse most often heard. I had been driving around all day, getting serious sunburn on my left arm, and waiting for that call that never came until it was too late to prevent the crime and save the victim from harm. Oh, that the witness had called when the criminal first appeared.

I’m reminded of the many friends and acquaintances over the years that felt ill or strange, assumed they would feel better soon, didn’t contact their doctor until, when the discomfort became unbearable, they went to the doctor and received the bad news – “It’s too late, too far advanced, to do anything about it.”

Why do we wait? Is it that we don’t know there are resources available to us? Is it that we don’t really understand the significance of what is actually happening around us? Are we living in

fantasy land – just hoping that ignoring things will somehow make it better? Is it that we are so proud that we don't want to appear to not have all the answers? Are we like the drowning person who is so busy kicking and slapping the water to stay afloat that we forget to yell for help from those around us? Are we like a bunch of men who, like the oft-referenced stereotype, won't stop at the side of the road to ask someone for directions?

Each of us leaders will find ourselves at some time at a place where we do not know or are uncertain of what to do next. When we don't know what to do, what do we do? That's something to talk about.

Here are some questions and thoughts that may help focus your conversation.

- When have you as a leader or as a leadership team found yourself at a place where you didn't know what to do next? What did you do? What was the result? What would you do if facing that situation today?
- If you or your team found yourself in a difficult situation, who would you call for help? Do you have a relationship with them already, or would it be a "cold call?"
- While I appreciate supportive friends, I have found that supportive friends, because of their bias and desire to be supportive for me, oftentimes do not give *great* advice or counsel because they are reluctant to say things that might be difficult or hurtful to me. Who, other than a supportive friend, do you trust as potential advisors in such situations? If no one comes to mind, what should you do?
- Do you know the services available from your denominational or association staff? Do you know who they are? Do you initiate occasional conversations with them just to keep in touch and without the impetus of a problem?
- What internal system or culture do you and the leadership team have to prompt you to call while a problem or situation is still small rather than potentially or imminently catastrophic? If you don't have some, should you?

I have been privileged to work with an amazing team at EFCA West that loves to strengthen and support churches and their leadership communities. Are we on your short list?

When should we seek help? When we don't know the way or haven't been in that place before. When we see new or early stages of conflict or declining metrics. The early stages may be characterized by new or simmering relational conflicts, increasing disunity, significant change on the horizon or in the recent past.

In turbulent times, leaders need to ask themselves, "What am I missing?" We need to ask other trusted advisors that same question, too, because we usually don't know what we didn't know until after we should have known it. And, we need to be asking that question of the right people before we get too far down the road to turn back, while we still have an avenue of escape.

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Am I or is our leadership team overconfident? Do we have a history of doing it on our own or of seeking wise advice and counsel from others before seeking to navigate turbulent times or uncharted territories? Do we seek an occasional “checkup” or wait until we feel the tingle in our arm and the crushing pain in our chest to seek help? The choice is ours – but our churches, and the people entrusted to our shepherding care, suffer the consequences. That’s 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/church-leadership/> or <https://efcawest.efcadistrict.org/something-to-talk-about-archives/>.