

Three Essential Types of Leadership Conversations by Gil Rendle

In the years that North American denominations have been experiencing shrinking membership and resources, we have learned quite a bit about leadership. Where we once defined leadership in terms of the decisions a leader made on behalf of others, the most recent focus has been on the conversations that leaders invite others into. Conversation is the currency of change. What we invite people to talk about, to think about, to pray about, determines the path that we will follow into the future. Leaders have the power of agenda - they have the responsibility of determining what a congregation or denomination will focus on by giving time and attention to a conversation. We are currently in a moment in which there are three essential types of conversations to which leaders can invite others.

Maintenance conversations have a primary focus on preserving who we were and following the rules already set. However, maintaining too much of the norms, policies, rules and traditions we have accrued over time can be stultifying to a people who now need to gather energy and courage to enter into a changed cultural mission field where old ways have become ineffective. Maintenance conversations have their place, but easily undermine the very mission (and changes) to which God now calls us.

Preferential conversations focus on satisfying the people who are already in our congregations, or focus on attracting the people we wish were in our congregations. Preferential conversations also have an appropriate place in our work. In any mission field, the carriers of the Good News have to first learn the language and the ways of the indigenous people. We need to understand the preferences of the people we are called to serve. Preferential conversations, however, easily slip into judgments about the right way and wrong way to go about things. Too often focusing only on our preferences for the way in which something is done easily trumps the importance of doing it. At its most limited, preferential conversations devolve into the search for ways to keep people happy and unchanged instead of being challenged and reshaped by the demands of the Gospel.

Missional conversations focus on purpose and on the possibility of the future. The origin of the word “mission” is mid-16th-century denoting the sending of the Holy Spirit into the world, from the Latin *missio* or *mittere* meaning “send.” To send is to talk about what is not yet, what is possible with the sending of the Holy Spirit. It is here that clarity of purpose and outcomes is most important in order to participate with the Holy Spirit to address that which is not yet accomplished. Discernment about what God dreams for us, and for which God sends the Spirit, requires a specificity about what is yet to be if we are to be the helping hands to make it so.