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WHY SHOULD WE BE PART OF EFCA AND EFCA WEST?

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It is becoming more frequent for church leaders to ask questions regarding EFCA or other denomination affiliations. They want to know why they should be a part of such group, what value-added they receive, and why an established church that is doing well should stay a part of the denomination.

These are good questions and deserve thoughtful answers. Recently, a church going through a pastoral transition asked these very questions, and EFCA West sought to provide them the thoughtful answer their question deserved. What follows is adapted from our answer to that church's questions.

Why should we be a part of EFCA, and specifically EFCA West?

EFCA polity regards each local church as autonomous, so this is a good question. The answer is actually fairly simple. It is because being the church is not intended to be done alone, it is a group activity. In the US, we tend to place very high value upon independence – it's in our collective DNA. Yet, we believe local church health, vitality, strength, and longevity (survival) is strongly related to interdependence rather than independence. Just as in a local church healthy ministry is related to working together in unity rather than working as individuals, so also there is increased health and vitality when churches work together with other churches, more so than when churches work independently in their own ministry silos.

Independent silo-churches over time can often become self-absorbed, arrogant, critical in spirit, and personality dependent (leader-centric). We see them become isolated, inbred, and eventually die. Churches that grow healthy, interdependent relationships with other churches tend to stay vibrant and focused upon sharing the Gospel with others. Their leaders (paid and volunteer) tend to stay sharper longer and are more engaged as a result of the sharing of ministry ideas and networks of support, exhortation, and accountability that are established through denominational linkages and friendships.

While local area church networks can effectively help area churches minister to a specific community or geographic area, we believe there are even more significant benefits related to being part of a larger community of churches through denominational affiliations such as EFCA. These organizations offer a breadth of experience, wisdom, opportunity, resources, and ministry opportunities that are simply not possible in the smaller, local area groups or in churches that try to go it alone. We offer two huge benefits derived from affiliation with EFCA West over other networks and associations.

1. First, all the affiliated churches are like-minded in their faith. This is not insignificant. Our agreement upon a statement of faith, both for what it includes and for that which is addressed by silence, is a strong unifying factor. It forms a common starting place for conversations related to ministry, values, and strategies. One can assume, with confidence, that people contacted from EFCA West share their core, critical tenets of faith and practice. One aspect of the EFCA that is precious to us is that we enthusiastically cling to the essential doctrines of the Christian faith but afford grace and mercy to those who may differ in areas of faith and practice where Scripture is less clear or silent. This is a group of believers we want to partner with. EFCA does not mandate from “headquarters” what individual churches do. Rather, EFCA supports each local church in doing what that local church believes God wants them to do.
2. EFCA West is not in the consulting business or the training seminar business – we have the ministry of ministering to churches and church leaders. What holds the staff of EFCA West together is a shared sense of mission, a shared sense of ministry, and a sharing of resources to accomplish both. EFCA West doesn’t need to continuously sell bigger and better conventions, series of books, or seek ever increasing numbers of clients seeking consultant services – we merely need to minister to churches and their leaders and plant new churches. While we support and attend events of other ministry organizations, and we encourage other leaders and churches to do so as well, we do not encourage them to do so at the expense of building a strong affiliation with EFCA, EFCA West, and other EFCA churches..

What does EFCA West do for us?

EFCA is a voluntary association of churches. Unlike some other denominations, EFCA does not lay claim to church buildings and property, we do not assign and transfer pastors and staff, and we do not make financial demands (though we do encourage financial support). The essence of being part of EFCA is relationship, voluntarily partnering with one another to further mutual ministry purposes.

When most EFCA West churches think of EFCA, they most often are thinking about EFCA West and, perhaps, ReachGlobal as well. We like to consider EFCA West to be the “hands-on” component of EFCA as it relates to churches in the west district.

Asking what EFCA West will do for you is a good and valid question. However, it is only half the question. The other half of the question is, “What does our local church do for EFCA West?”

The strength of relationship-based organizations comes from the fusing of two questions for all the parties: What can the organization do for me? And, what can I do for the organization and other members? To omit either question is to create a transaction-based, customer/client relationship rather than interdependent ministry relationships.

To survive and thrive over time, relationships require nurturing, and the nurture must come from both parties. So, we like to reframe the question into a more generic question, “What is needed

for EFCA West and a church to have a strong ministry partnership relationship?” Here are some thoughts, in no particular order.

- Mutual engagement. EFCA West needs to reach out to churches, and churches need to reach out to EFCA West. Absent these contacts, the relationship will not thrive. EFCA West uses several techniques to reach out to churches. It is important to us to have regular contacts so that we can minister to meet actual needs. Among our relationship efforts are the following.
 - Periodic telephone and email contacts. These usually involve EFCA West staff and pastors. Admittedly, we sometimes don't have these contacts with an individual pastor as often as we would like to, yet the phone rings both ways.
 - Regional gatherings. These are opportunities for EFCA pastors and leaders to meet together regionally. These regional gatherings are important relational contacts that EFCA West staff tries to regularly attend.
 - Road trips. Sometimes EFCA West staff members make road trips to visit churches and pastors. We appreciate church leaders making time available to meet during these travels.
- Decision support. We encourage churches to let us know of significant changes, planning, needs, or other issues they face. Frankly, we have found that most of our incoming calls come after a problem has set in or grown huge rather than while it was small and more easily addressed. We prefer to come alongside churches and leaders when the damage from these issues is relatively minor rather than waiting to become involved when the damage has become catastrophic.
- Financial support. We encourage churches to contribute financially to EFCA and EFCA West. The default ask is 3% or general fund giving. Obviously, absent financial support from individual churches, there are no funds to support these ministries to local churches. Many churches are financially strapped – perhaps even most. We encourage those churches to contribute *something, anything* every month to keep feeling like they are a part of this ministry relationship. Sadly, many churches decide that because they cannot give much, they will give nothing. Jesus noted that where our treasure is, there our heart is. When our finances go elsewhere and we stop supporting a relationship or organization, our hearts tend to go elsewhere, too, and the relationship dies.
- Board participation. Some pastors don't include their board members or other pastoral staff in their relationship with EFCA. I believe this is a mistake. EFCA's ministries to church leaders are intended to be much broader than just lead/senior pastors.
- Leadership community communication. Every month, EFCA West sends via email blast a copy of *Zipline*, our monthly sharing of information of interest to church leaders. I include a “Something to Talk About” article in each *Zipline* that is intended to help pastors and board members learn, understand, and talk about key issues that impact their leadership and the health of the local congregation. You and others are welcome to receive this, too, merely by signing up on the Website (address and information to follow).
- Being there. EFCA West helps churches in transition or facing important decisions. The EFCA West team frequently assists churches that have encountered a crisis. This can be done remotely or in-person as may be needed. As we like to say, “When you are EFCA, you are not alone.” It is generally much more effective to offer and receive suggestions and guidance at the start of a process rather than at the mid-point or end of the process

when lots of water has already gone under the bridge. Many churches try handling things by themselves but then call for help after making several foreseeable mistakes. One of the strengths of EFCA and EFCA West is that our staff has been there and done that, repeatedly, and we've learned lessons to share with others as a result. We want to share what we've learned with churches and their leaders..

What are the benefits of staying in EFCA?

A good summary of the ministries of EFCA West is accessible through our Webpage at <https://efca-west.districts.efca.org/>.

I believe that I have addressed other benefits previously in this document. To reiterate, "When you are EFCA, you are not alone." I think this is the key issue when it comes to church affiliations. Total independence may feel good when everything is going well, but when sin invades the camp, doctrinal wolves are banging on the door, or a key leader or pastor needs some TLC, it's good to not be alone and to already have established relationships with those who love and care about you and know you and are poised and ready to serve you.

I don't have the time or space to comment upon the actual depth of what we do. This is only a small glimpse of our team efforts to catalyze church plants, resolve conflicts, promote theological excellence through ongoing education and credentialing processes, secure financing for churches, navigate administrative realities with every level of government including immigration matters, strengthen pastoral marriages, increase our kingdom effectiveness among all people groups in an age of unprecedented change and volatility, effectively reach and disciple the ever-increasing Spanish-speaking and other non-English-speaking populations in our midst, network ministry workers with others within their area of ministry focus (music, children, student, etc.), and much more.

If a church does not wish to fully participate in a mutual, interdependent relationship with a denomination and other churches, the potential benefits are decreased in correlation to the lack of participation.

Please note that I have not addressed at all the "missionary" arm of EFCA, ReachGlobal, or Reach National's ministries to churches and groups in the US. You can find these at on the EFCA Website (efca.org) and clicking on the ministries tab. Again, all these services are offered to churches – none are mandated. It's our attempt to help, but churches need to accept it.

What can EFCA do for us to help with our pastor search?

To a great extent, EFCA West will do what the church allows us to do. That said, we cannot (and I don't think you want us to) make decisions for you. Our default position is that we provide input for you, but the local church makes the decisions.

We are and have been ready and prepared to assist you in developing your season of transition plans and strategies; refining and clarifying your mission, vision, values and ministry strategies; providing guidance and broader context for decisions the governing board and search committee

need to make; troubleshooting processes before you undertake them; and generally accompanying and assisting you as best we can throughout the season of transition. Frankly, churches in some kind of transition are a major focus of my work and much of the work of the team.

Conclusion

I trust this is a good start for your conversation. It's always a little awkward to put stuff like this into writing or having to read it because the written word contains no non-verbal cues or conversational feedback. Suffice to say that we at EFCA West are excited about our ministry to churches and we look forward to partnering in effective ministry with you, the leadership team, and the congregation as you envision and move toward the future you believe God has for you.