

SOMETHING TO TALK ABOUT

A conversation guide for church leaders

Autonomous but Interdependent – What’s Missing?

Because I serve as a church leadership consultant, it is probably no surprise that four of my favorite consultant questions start with the words who, why, what and how.

- Who are we?
- Why are we here?
- What are we trying to accomplish?
- How are we going to accomplish that?

I think most of us spend too little time, if any, thinking about these four questions as we serve in the churches we lead and as we participate in the work of the Evangelical Free Church of America (EFCA). In this month’s article, I will focus on the first question – Who are we? It’s something to talk about.

It is easy to take for granted that we know who we are – but over time, based upon our behaviors, it seems many of us forget the answer both in our churches and in our denominations. It is one thing to have a “who we are statement” and it is entirely another thing to actually live that way. Let’s look at the “who” of the EFCA.

“The Evangelical Free Church of America shall be an association and fellowship of autonomous but interdependent congregations...”¹ There’s more, but I’ll stop there.

I want to focus on three words – “autonomous but interdependent” – because I have found that one of these adjectives is very present among EFCA churches and the other is frequently missing. You already know which is which. Our family of churches seems to do “autonomous” very well, but not so much “interdependent.”² And I want to suggest to us that our lack of practicing “interdependence” is harming the mission of the EFCA and that of your church.

Our culture in the USA seems to not think highly of interdependence – we are quite taken by the concept of rugged individualism, doing our own thing, pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps, never showing weakness, and the like. We want to be strong, courageous, and fully complete as individuals but that is not how God made us and that is not how our world works.

¹ EFCA Articles of Incorporation, Article II, Section A (shortened).

² “Autonomous” means self-governing; “interdependent” means that we need each other to fulfill our mission.

Our world depends upon people working together to accomplish what needs to be done for the benefit of all – or at least most. And that’s how God intends the Church to work, too. We are a body made of many different parts, each of which is needed to be a healthy body.

One of EFCA’s objectives (and, hence, a stated objective of its member churches as well) is to “facilitate fellowship, harmony, and cooperation among local congregations and unite them for mutual ministries beyond the scope and ability of a local congregation standing alone.”³ So many of the churches with whom I meet would love to be able to do certain meaningful ministries or plant churches but fail to do so. Almost without exception I find the two main factors that led to their decisions to abandon their efforts are:

1. They don’t believe they have the resources to do that ministry, and
2. They are not trying to work together with any other local congregation(s) to pool resources to be able to do it.

So they don’t do it.

They have mastered autonomous, but interdependence is missing from their church worldview.

Oftentimes a small church with limited resources will fall into despair over a significant financial or facility need that they cannot afford or do not have the resources to deal with. Sadly, they often deal with this issue in a way that demonstrates a “church worldview” of autonomous and independent rather than a “church worldview” of autonomous interdependence where churches help one another. Some churches have great need. Some churches are blessed with resources. What if we actually worked together?

Let me offer some topics for discussion among your team members related to the “missing” component of interdependence. These discussion topics are focused on the EFCA and our member churches. If you are not part of an EFCA church, you will want to modify the questions.

- How much do you, the church staff, and the leadership team (especially the church board) know about the EFCA? Do you know and actively participate in or financially support any of the following:
 - Regional gatherings?
 - Annual theology conference?
 - EFCA West District Conference?
 - EFCA One conference?
 - Reach Global and its ministries?
 - Do you support EFCA’s missionaries?
 - Do you refer people that express an interest in serving in a missionary context to Reach Global?
 - When you hear of a disaster, stateside or afar, do you think of contacting EFCA’s Crisis Response ministry to assist with manpower or financial gifts?

³ EFCA Articles of Incorporation, Article II, Section B(3).

- Reach National and its ministries?
 - Reaching all people?
 - EFCA West First Wednesday Workshops on Zoom?
 - Reach Network, our church-planting effort?
 - Reach Students, our support for student ministries and leaders?
 - Trinity International University and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School?
- When was the last time our church truly partnered with another church or churches for the advancement of the kingdom? How did it go? What were the lessons learned? When will we do it next? Have we ever thought of pooling resources with several churches to plant a church together?
 - Do we have mutually supportive relationships with the EFCA churches around us? Do we pray for them? How do we support them?
 - Are we generous with the things God has allowed us to amass or do we hoard them for ourselves? Do we look for opportunities to share what God has provided or do we wait for the circumstances to become dire before offering help?
 - Have we ever considered offering help by asking our own members to help a nearby congregation with a significant need? Do you have a decent guitar player that could lead worship for a season at a struggling church? Do you have a couple of children's workers that could help a struggling, new, or revitalizing church get their children's ministry off the ground? If asked, would we even consider being inconvenienced ourselves to help the other church?

In everything I wrote above I condemn myself because I forget interdependence far too often. God is still teaching me what it means to be interdependent – to be part of the big-C Church. We need each other. Two is better than one, and three is better yet (Eccl. 4:9-12). Imagine 200 churches working interdependently in the EFCA West district and beyond.

EFCA, like every other organization, *including the church you serve*, works best when its members support, work together, and are actively engaged in the mission of the organization rather than merely consuming its services. Over the past few decades there has been a significant rise in the number of “independent” churches – I’m not encouraged by the results of this swing. Let’s seek anew to foster the interdependence and cooperation that characterized the EFCA’s forebears in their early years and see what God can do when we work together to make Him known in our desperately lost world.

Feel free to contact me or any member of the EFCA West team if you would like some assistance in moving the effort forward. We would love to partner with you.

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/>