

March 1, 2016

## **In Accord with A Cord: Doing Life as Team**

A longtime acquaintance recently greeted me with “I didn’t know you were still alive, given your absence from the monthly issues of Ziplines.” It was a valid point, thus this article. I submit it, not only as proof that I still have a pulse, but as an easy explanation of why such an absence so easily occurred. In short, I work with a remarkable team of people who have more to say and offer than monthly Zipline e-zines can contain. As our team discussed this, we decided to begin an intentional cycle of contributions from those of us who are privileged to serve you in the capacity of EFCA West district ministries. I was picked to start the rotation, and it was easy to select a topic.

Let me digress a moment to state the obvious: one of the most powerful tools a follower of Jesus has to share with others is the story of their own spiritual journey. To properly understand the significance and relevance of my commitment to “doing life as team,” you need to meet my dad, Bob. Still healthy and active at the age of 89, he was born in 1927, two years before the beginning of the Great Depression. The second of four children born to a seamstress whose husband abandoned her and the kids, he prematurely became the man of the household, as well as a teenage primary provider for his mother and siblings. It is easy to understand why he adopted a survivalist mentality and a philosophy of self-preservation. Though he became a Christian, his subtle and not-so-subtle life lessons in raising me in the 1950s and 1960s were “learn to do life alone, because ultimately, nothing else is guaranteed.” I embraced this Clint Eastwood “High Plains Drifter” outlook with gusto, and growing up as the only son on a cattle ranch only reinforced the opportunity to insulate myself from vulnerability and dependence upon others.

Fast forward to 2016 and my privileged role of serving with a team of 8 godly people who are committed to sharing their lives and hard-earned wisdom with those of you in any of our 200+ EFCA churches spread throughout 7 states. I would submit to you that nothing speaks more convincingly of the transformative power of the Gospel than the transformation in me from a high plains survivalist drifter (cue up a refrain of the recently deceased Glenn Frey of “The Eagles” singing “Desperado”... my pre-regeneration theme song) to a sold-out believer in doing life as team.

There were numerous clues I should have picked up much earlier than I did. Back on the ranch, it was not an uncommon experience to encounter a sick bull, steer, or heifer somewhere out on the vast 36 square mile spread we leased and managed. If the animal wasn’t caught and medicated while you had it in sight, the probability was that it would die, costing us several hundred dollars in much needed income at round-up time. But being alone on a horse meant that the 400-1000 pound animal had to be roped, thrown, hog-tied, and medicated by none other than yours truly. Two things made that possible: a good horse and a good rope (lariat). A lariat is nothing more than a nylon or polyester length of braided cords, which when tied off to a saddle horn on a

trained horse can contain and control an animal equal to or heavier than the horse keeping the rope tight. Now consider Solomon's words in Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

“Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up. Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.”

Eugene Peterson treats this humorously in “The Message:”

“It's better to have a partner than go it alone: Share the work, share the wealth.... With a friend, you can face the worst. Can you round up a third?” (i.e, the more the merrier).

But it would be many years before I made the connection between a 3-cord-braided rope and my need to let other people help me through this difficult journey called “life.” It's been almost 20 years since I concluded that a one-man approach to serving EFCA district churches was not only impossible, but possibly unbiblical, especially given the growing complexity of doing ministry in today's diverse cultural context. And it's been almost ten years since we were able, by God's grace, to merge multiple districts and upsize our personnel team to its current makeup of nine seasoned specialists serving you in areas like pastoral care, immigration, leadership development, church planting, theology and credentialing, pastoral placement, ministry to women in ministry (and those women married to men in vocational ministry), Hispanic ministries, and a long list of legal/administrative specialties. And I'm sure I've missed some!

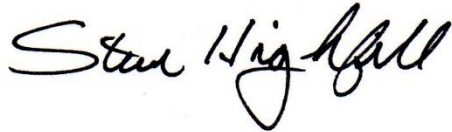
As a pastor, every time I taught on a topic like marriage or parenting, there was the difficult tightrope to walk between those who were in a marriage vs. those who were single/divorced/widowed, or those who were biological parents vs. those who were infertile, adoptive, or bereaved. It strikes me that harping on the value of team has the same dynamic at stake. Some reading this are on healthy teams and find it easy to say “amen.” Others would love to be on a team, but have few options in personnel or resources. And yet others are on a team, but one that is unhealthy or even dysfunctional. I don't want to be insensitive to those realities. But in the same way that our merciful and gracious God has allowed me to experience both a marriage and a ministry team experience that I don't deserve and didn't have the wisdom to create, I believe that He wants you to experience at least some aspect of life and ministry which He speaks about so much in scripture. You probably don't need much advice on this, but let me suggest some obvious or not-so-obvious steps you could take:

- If you are on a healthy team, thank God often, and renew your vigilance to keep it healthy and productive.
- If you are on an unhealthy team, refuse to settle for status quo. Through prayer and outspoken insistence, do what you can to change the situation, get outside help, or be willing to move on. Life is too short to labor in a toxic and debilitating environment.

- If you are alone due to resources or church size, fervently ask God to bring you a Jonathan, Timothy, Ruth, Aquila, Priscilla, Barnabas or \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank from your most envied biblical story of team ministry). I join you in praying for a way to unload part of your life burden through the miracle of partnership. Perhaps the answer will be found in a newcomer showing up. Or maybe God will open your eyes to the availability of those in your world not recognized for their partnership potential before now.

Part of the power of my own story is how little credit I deserve in either recognizing the need for team or in creating it. At the very least, please pray for our EFCA West team as we seek to be faithful stewards in serving our growing family of churches. Additionally, we join you in praying that God would surprise you by surrounding you with partners and teammates who not only share your commitment to serve Jesus faithfully, but do it in a way that manifests the creative miracle of God's complex, interactive, and inter-dependent family. In coming months, you will meet and hear from various members of our EFCA West team. On their behalf, please know how grateful we are for you, and what a privilege we count it labor in the Lord's vineyard with you.

In His faithfulness,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Steve Highfill". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Steve Highfill, Regional Director  
EFCA West