

# Something to Talk About – A conversation guide for church leaders

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## Why EFCA?

*Note: 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.*

*Several months ago, a church in our EFCA West family that was going through a pastoral transition contacted a member of our staff and asked three pretty good questions. It got us to thinking that our member churches and their leaders may well have similar questions, and that it might be beneficial to anonymize and share our response for the benefit of other churches in the EFCA West family.*

*The three questions were:*

- *What does EFCA West do for us?*
- *What are the benefits of staying in EFCA?*
- *What can EFCA do to help with our pastor search?*

*Here is our team member's response, anonymized and with a couple of updates. We believe these questions and answers are something to talk about.*

Dear: (Elder):

Thank you for the questions you asked in your recent email. You asked for a clear and succinct reply, yet the breadth of the questions you have asked requires more than brevity in response. I'll give my best effort to combine brevity and clarity.

It's always difficult to answer written questions in a vacuum. I don't know the starting points or filters that have given rise to these questions at the church. The context that frames a question, be it anger, inquisitiveness, investigative, fact-finding, disillusionment, frustration, counting blessings, etc., is often more important than the words used to ask the question. I will answer the questions under the assumption that they were asked from the context of seeking information about the benefits of a local church being part of a denomination and, more specifically, a part of the EFCA and its West District (EFCA West). I like to consider EFCA West to be the "hands-on" component of EFCA as it relates to churches in the west district.

I will obviously be answering your inquiry from my perspective. One of the joys of working with EFCA is that EFCA embraces the uniqueness of the individual, whether an individual believer, team member, or church. So, what you will receive from me is my response – there is no "official party line" response to individual inquiries such as yours. Other members of the team will likely emphasize other aspects should you ask them, but you will find overall consistency among us.

**Why be a part of a larger denomination, specifically EFCA/EFCA West?**

Since EFCA polity regards each local church as autonomous, why should a church be part of a larger denomination? The answer is actually fairly simple. It is because 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, I 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 ministry silos.

In my experience, independent silo-churches often become over time self-absorbed, arrogant, critical in spirit, and personality dependent (leader-centric). They can become isolated, inbred, and eventually die. Churches that grow healthy, interdependent relationships with other churches tend to stay vibrant longer and more 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, I 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. I share two huge benefits derived from affiliation with a denomination such as EFCA over other networks and associations.

1. First, in the denominational context, all the affiliated churches are like-minded in their faith. This is not insignificant. The 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 discussion related to ministry, values, and strategies. One can assume, with confidence, that people contacted from the denomination will share the basic tenets of faith and practice. One aspect of the EFCA that is precious to me 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 I want to partner with. EFCA does not mandate from “headquarters” what individual churches do. EFCA supports each local church in doing what each local church believes God wants each local church to do.
2. Denominations such as EFCA are not in the consulting business or the training seminar business – we have the ministry of ministering to churches and church leaders. What holds a denomination such as EFCA together is a shared sense of mission, a shared sense of ministry, and a sharing of resources to accomplish both. Denominations don'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 I belong to other ministry organizations, and I encourage other leaders and churches to do so as well, I do not encourage them to do so at the expense of building a strong denominational affiliation.

### **What does EFCA 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.

You asked what EFCA does for your church, and that is a good question. Yet, I believe it is only half the question. The other half of the question is, “what does our church do for EFCA?” (Please note that I don’t know the answer to that question, so I’m not asking it judgmentally)

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 that nurture must come from both parties. So, I’d like to reframe your question into a more generic question, “What is needed for EFCA and a church to have a strong ministry partnership relationship?” Here are some thoughts, in no particular order.

- Mutual involvement. EFCA needs to reach out to churches, and churches need to reach out to EFCA. 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.
  - Cluster meetings. This is the opportunity for EFCA pastors and leaders to meet together regionally. These cluster meetings are important relational contacts that EFCA West staff tries to regularly attend.
  - Road trips. Sometimes an EFCA West staff member just makes a road trip to visit churches and pastors. While we cannot always make schedules work, we very much appreciate it when pastors and church leaders extend the courtesy of making time for us during one of these road trips.
- We encourage churches to let us know of significant changes, planning, needs, or other issues they face. Frankly, I have found that most of my incoming calls come after a problem has set in or grown huge rather than while it was small and more easily addressed. We would much prefer to talk early on about potential problems than have to engage in crisis response later.
- We encourage churches to contribute financially to EFCA and EFCA West. As you know, absent financial support from individual churches, there are no funds to support EFCA’s ministries to local churches. Many churches are financially strapped – perhaps even most. I encourage those churches to contribute *something, anything* every month to continue behaving and perpetuate the 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. Anything is better than nothing.
- 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 to pastors.
- 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 copy of “Something to Talk About” in each Zipline – this 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, [www.efcawest.org](http://www.efcawest.org).
- EFCA West also helps churches in transition or facing important decisions. We recently spoke on the phone and exchanged several emails regarding your upcoming pastoral transition. 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 do this and 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. We encourage churches and church leaders to contact us at the start of a transition process rather than later.

### **What are the benefits of staying in EFCA?**

A good summary of the ministries of EFCA West is accessible through our Webpage at [www.efcawest.org](http://www.efcawest.org).

I believe that I have addressed other benefits previously in this document. One phrase I often use is, "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 are poised and ready to serve. And, this love and care is not merely focused upon pastors, it's also focused upon church leaders who sometimes find themselves alone when a pastor suddenly moves on.

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 (32 currently underway in the district); resolve conflicts; promote theological excellence through ongoing education and credentialing processes; educate, equip and coach church leaders and board members; secure financing for churches; navigate administrative realities within every level of government including immigration matters; strengthen pastoral marriages; come alongside churches and leaders during times of transition; 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 population in our midst; network ministry workers with others within their area of ministry focus (music, children, student, etc.); and much more.

Please note that I have not addressed at all the "missionary" arm of EFCA, ReachGlobal or ReachNational's ministries to churches and groups in the US. You can find these at <http://go.efca/org> then 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.

With all this available, I find it hard to believe that a church would not choose to fully participate in a mutual, interdependent relationship with a denomination and other like-minded churches

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

To a great extent, EFCA West will do what your church leaders allow 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 the work of the team.

Two staff members, Brian Farone and Paul Schliep, lead our Ministry Connect process where we confidentially connect churches looking for pastors with qualified pastors looking or available for churches. Our team has deep history with pastors and churches, and contacts throughout the country with other districts to help find good fits between pastors and churches.

Pastoral transitions are difficult for churches. Successful transitions require open, honest, full, and transparent communication and assessments of the church, its programs, its mission/vision/values/strategies, its past, its present, and its envisioned future. Many church leadership teams fall into unproductive habits over time which can negatively impact relationships, discussions, and decisions. An important part of the transition season is to eliminate unproductive and destructive habits, create new, more productive habits, and clarify the church's mission/vision/values/strategies for its current and future ministry. It can be painful to address these things, especially if relationships are not very healthy, but the payoff from going through these processes and rebuilding these relationships is immense when one wants a healthy, vibrant church in the future. Once these are completed, a search committee can start the process of seeking a pastor willing and equipped to lead them into this future. To call a pastor prior to completing the process is to create the likelihood of selecting a good person who is ill-equipped or reluctant to pastor and lead the church into its unique future and create conflicting expectations about direction and performance.

## **Conclusion**

I trust this is a good start for our 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 church family as you envision and move toward the future you believe God has for you.

*Let us know how your conversation goes. Contact Bob Osborne by e-mail at [bob@efcawest.org](mailto:bob@efcawest.org).*