

**An Introduction
to
The Evangelical Free Church of Canada**

- our ethos and practice



*December 2008
Ron Unruh and Rob Stewart*

Preface

This paper was originally authored by Ron Unruh, president of the EFCC from 2002-2008 and Rob Stewart, district superintendent of the Lower Pacific District. The document's title was, "The Distinct Nature of the Ethos of The Evangelical Free Church of Canada," and it was written as the EFCC's submission to the ACTS Denominational Leader's Day of November 10, 2006.

For this meeting, each of the six partner denominations within ACTS was asked to provide a written submission, in which we briefly summarize our denomination's history, beliefs, and distinctives, and to further state how we believe that these are and/or should be lived out in the "ideal" church within our movement.

Ron and I, as your representatives for the EFCC, found this to be a challenging and very useful exercise. As a district superintendent, I have further found this paper to be a helpful tool for introducing people to the EFCC and for articulating our hopes for our local churches in a rather concise way.

In the fall of 2008, I took on the task of revising this document. Since 2006, we as the EFCC have adopted a revised Statement of Faith (EFCC Conference, July 2008) and our document of our six "distinctives" has been replaced by the document, "Our Character and Calling" (EFCC BOD, May 2008). While these changes have been significant, they do not reflect a change to our denomination's character or sense of calling. I have included the document, "Evangelical Free Church of Canada - Our Character and Calling" document as an "Appendix A."

Our EFCC constitution defines us as, "... an association and fellowship of autonomous and interdependent congregations of like faith and polity whose purpose shall be to glorify God." We have perhaps spent too little time describing what this balance of "autonomy and interdependence" looks like and how it "works." I have sought to address this by adding an "Appendix B." While this is specific to the Lower Pacific District, it is my hope that it may prove to provide a useful template for other districts as well. Your district may choose to insert an "Appendix B" that is specific to your district. It is by joining one of our districts that a church becomes a member of the EFCC family.

It is my hope that this document may be a helpful resource to you for defining and ministering within the EFCC.

*Rob Stewart
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Our presentation is in two parts. The first is an overview of the EFCC ethos, history and structure. The second is a description of how this is/would ideally be lived out in the local church.

Part I. The Spiritual Ethos of the EFCC.

The term **Evangelical** refers to our commitment to the proclamation of the Gospel and to the authority of Scripture as being inerrant in the original writings and the only safe guide for faith and practice. The term **Free** refers to our form of church government as being congregational, depending upon the active participation of believers for decisions and directions.

The EFCC is a multi-layered organization of like-minded churches and the layers consist of several ministry dimensions. Those are: the local church itself, 142 of them; the District Superintendent and District Board and sub committees; the National Office and National Ministries, Executive Leaders, Support Staff, General Board of Directors and Committees, and the International Department with its International Leaders. The denominational purpose is, "To glorify God by serving in the birth and growth of healthy churches across Canada and around the world."

The Evangelical Free Church of Canada is a denomination committed to the local church. It is our conviction that the ideal context for producing personal life change in fulfillment of the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:37-39) and the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) is the local church of which Jesus Christ is the Head. We also believe that a voluntary, interdependent, network of churches enables us to fulfill the mandate of the Church more effectively. Districts in the EFCC connect Evangelical Free Churches by province or geographical region. A district superintendent and a district board provide services in each district in ministries such as pastoral care and placement, credentialing of ministers, church consultation and the strategic establishment of new churches.

Congregationalism and autonomy are fundamental concepts in the EFCC, and it is simply a matter of degree by which these are applied at every dimension of our ministry. While there is latitude in the way it is practiced, our local churches are congregational by conviction. Local churches remain autonomous upon their affiliation with other Free Churches through a district. This is supported as a primary belief in our EFCC Constitution, which describes the EFCC as, "... an association and fellowship of autonomous and interdependent congregations of like faith and polity whose purpose shall be to glorify God." (EFCC Constitution Article II.2.1). The support and involvement of churches in district or national programs, projects and financial support is voluntary and good will based. Each of six Districts is also self-directed or autonomous. Church planting and church health are the responsibilities of the districts. They seek to stimulate and resource district churches, and will often freely ally their efforts through agreed upon initiatives. Top-down governance is rejected making district and national leadership a challenge to lead through influence gained through trust.

Until recently, we sought to summarize the ethos of the EFCC in a statement of six "distinctives." These were:

1. *The Evangelical Free Church is inclusive not exclusive*
2. *The Evangelical Free Church is evangelical but not separatistic;*
3. *The Evangelical Free Church is ecumenical in spirit though not in structure;*
4. *The Evangelical Free Church believes in liberty with responsibility;*
5. *The Evangelical Free Church believes in both the rational and relational dimensions of Christianity;*
6. *The Evangelical Free Church is congregational in government.*

This summary was authored by the Evangelical Free Church of America, of which we were a part until we formed the Evangelical Free Church of Canada in 1984. It has served us well. Recently however, we felt a need to rephrase our six distinctives in a more contemporary and Canadian way. Our EFCC Board of Directors established a task force to review our distinctives, and the result was a new document, entitled, “Our Character and Calling.” This document was approved by our Board of Directors in May of 2008 and is now in circulation. It does not represent a change of our ethos. It is an affirmation of it. We have included this as an “Appendix A” to this document.

As an, “association of churches” rather than a denomination, we are more bound together by our commitment to the gospel than by the ties of denominational structure. The introduction to our document, “Our Character and Calling, “ states:

The Evangelical Free Church of Canada is an association of autonomous churches united in a common commitment to God’s evangel--the gospel of Jesus Christ, who died and rose again to give us eternal life. To God’s glory, the gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. Our essential theological convictions are vitally connected to this gospel.

Our newly adopted Statement of Faith (Adopted at EFCC National Conference, July 2008), focuses on the gospel and articulates ten articles of faith, in which there is recognition of God’s universal saving purposes and His worldwide Church. Article number seven states,

“We believe that the true church comprises all who have been justified by God’s grace through faith alone in Christ alone. They are united by the Holy Spirit in the body of Christ, of which He is the Head. The true church is manifest in local churches, whose membership should be composed only of believers...”

This statement is consistent with the doctrinal heritage of the EFCC. We have been and are less exclusive than most other evangelical denominations in North America. This heritage is shared by The Evangelical Free Church of Canada (EFCC) and of America (EFCA) as the founding denominations of Trinity Junior College in 1962; Trinity Western College in 1972; and Trinity Western University in 1984. We believe that the wide embrace of the Free Church was the catalyst to the formation of a consortium of theological schools known today as ACTS in which six denominations cooperate to provide seminary training on one campus. The eschatological position of the former EFCC Statement of Faith was articulated at a time when it seemed important to distinguish a “premillennial” position. We have wrestled with this, as it appeared to be inconsistent with our spirit that membership in the local church should be based upon faith in Christ alone. Our revised Statement of Faith does not articulate a premillennial position. This does not reflect a change of conviction so much as the conviction that we need not break fellowship over a matter of doctrine that is not essential to the gospel. This is consistent with the ethos of the EFCC.

The distinct ethos of the Evangelical Free Church movement is not Canada specific but shared by churches around the world and the EFCC is voluntarily a member federation within the International Federation of Free Evangelical Churches (IFFEC).¹ Thirty-eight countries enjoy this association that is not simply fellowship driven but mission driven.

Our overseas commitments are a distinct aspect of our ethos. The Free Church movement’s history in Scandinavian countries that is our early line of origin, underscores the essential value of international ministry. Today our global vision is facilitated by the EFCCM (Mission), which is our international arm.

¹ www.iffec.com

We acknowledge that our denomination exists by virtue of the congregations that have aligned with us. We know that as a denominational entity we are intended to serve these local churches rather than the churches serving the denomination. We are aware that our congregations no longer solely depend upon national and district offices for resources because of the many online and parachurch providers. We also realize that denominational loyalty and tradition are no longer adhesives but rather services rendered and values added are what motivate congregations to give. We are absolutely dependent upon church financial support and our ethos pinches us here as we seek constantly to apprise our churches of funding needs at national, district and international levels. We know that we must at all times be involved in covenant relationships between the various dimensions of our denominational life.

For autonomous churches and districts to work together effectively, an unusual level of good will and commitment is required. Churches that agree to work together toward certain objectives do not compromise autonomy. Districts that cooperate to accomplish shared ministry goals do not sacrifice autonomy. In all of our districts, the majority of our churches embrace this and are enthusiastic about their affiliation with the Free Church. Most churches are glad to assist one another and to join together in ministry that is both strategic and effective. Most churches do not want us to go backward or to retreat from missional ministry. Perhaps the challenge of our moment is to translate what we claim to be into a functioning movement of churches that is fulfilling our stated purpose of, "...glorifying God by serving in the birth and growth of healthy churches across Canada and around the world."

We believe in the values and distinctives of the EFCC so much that we want to promote the Evangelical Free Church as a movement. What can we do to advance the Free Church movement? What can districts do? What can the national office do? What can EFCCM do? What can the local church do? We have constructed district, national and international levels precisely to promote this Free Church movement and mission in which we believe so strongly.

Part II. The Spiritual Ethos of the EFCC in the Local Church.

Based upon the nature, ethos and doctrine of our denomination, we will find a variety in practice and program within our churches. This is considered desirable, where we will agree on the essentials and show grace on the non-essentials.

This conviction comes not through compromise, but a commitment to mission, in light of Christ's imminent return:

To them (pioneers) the local church was a voluntary association of convinced believers. Once they began to put in writing what was commonly believed among them, they were silent on those doctrines which through the centuries had divided Christians of equal dedication, Biblical knowledge, spiritual maturity and love for Christ. They did not believe that these differences could be resolved at a mission meeting or in one generation. In view of the imminent return of Christ, there was no time to argue about what they considered to be nonessential... This must not be seen as evidence of weakness or compromise. The early leaders were strong and unmoveable. They had convictions which had been formed through a study of the word of God and strengthened in the heat of persecution. Members of the little flock had too much in common to divide themselves over a single doctrine. They did not believe that one should add any requirements for membership to the one rule that God, in his Word had revealed as the requirement for membership in His body... There can be no second class members in a Free Church congregation. Those who hold one view on baptism, for example, should not look down upon those who hold another. One cannot force his view upon another nor a doctrine upon which the church is silent. "The Significance of Silence", pp. 16,17. (silence re: baptism, the Lord's Supper, eternal security and the tribulation).

Practical Examples:

While we are not a denomination known to be “charismatic,” in the general use of the word, we are also not opposed to “charismatic” ministry. Our doctrinal statement does not take a position on this. Our autonomous local churches, then, may range from being, “non-charismatic,” to very “charismatic.” The local church will determine this. Practice will be guided by the Scriptures and sensitive to the people of the congregation. In the EFCC ethos, we would always hope that there would be room in our hearts and fellowship for both the “charismatic” and the “not-so-charismatic,” with mutual love and respect being shown.

A local church may be contemporary, and then again, it might not be. It will reflect the demographic and composition of the congregation. We are not liturgical. An example would be the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. We generally celebrate the Lord’s Supper on the first Sunday of the month, but our practice of how this is done will vary. It may be led and served by pastors and /or lay people, by elders, by deacons, by men or women. There is flexibility.

Our typical church service will tend to have worship that is, “blended” and give significant time (30-35 minutes) to the teaching of the Word of God through the sermon. The delivery and style of the sermon will vary by the church and personnel, but people always come expecting to be fed from God’s Word.

Characteristics of a Healthy EFCC Church.

In short, the healthy EFCC church will be committed to glorify God and characterized by:

- A commitment to Christ as Lord.
- A foundation of God’s Word.
- A focus on service.
- A ministry team of God’s people.
- A growth in number through evangelism and depth through discipleship.
- An impact on its community and our world for Christ.

Following are some qualities that we would hope the ideal healthy church in our denomination would exhibit.

1. The Word of God is honoured, taught and looked to as authoritative in our services, practices, decisions, meetings and lives.
2. The church will be Christ-centred. It will be evident that our church is about honouring Christ our Lord and serving others, not about, “me.”
3. The pastor(s) will have a conviction of God’s calling on their lives and be committed to servant-leadership and leading by example.
4. There will be a commitment by all leadership personnel, that leadership is both servant-leadership and plural. While the pastor is key to the church, its vision and ministry, he is not the, “end-all.” An effective pastor will be glad for the counsel and participation of godly elders and deacons and will be sensitive to the needs of the congregation.
5. There will be a conviction and commitment to the “priesthood of all believers,” and this will be evident in the ministry and leadership of the church. Laypeople and staff will work together as a team, both publicly and behind the scenes.
6. People will be getting saved through the lives and testimony of the congregation and in a variety of contexts.
7. People will be discipled, mentored and equipped to serve God in their personal, family and vocational lives.

8. Worship will engage both the “head” and the “heart.” Worship will include the teaching of the Word and also an application of the Word in life, through testimony and the sharing of one another’s lives.
9. The church will be missional, with an impact, both locally and globally. It will engage its community and have a heart for the world.
10. The church will be team player, in the community, in our denomination, in the Christian community, and wherever possible, in our world.
11. The church will be generous, and as stewards, share its people, resources and facility with others in God’s work.
12. The people of the church will be generous with their gifts of time and resources in the service of the local and global church and the local community, in the Name of Christ.
13. The church will be multigenerational.
14. The church will be growing and reproducing. While each church context is unique and will reflect the demographics of its region, a healthy church should be growing in its impact to its community. The church will look for doors that God is opening for greater and fresh ministry.
15. The church will be flexible in its practice and traditions, will embrace new works of God and be open to new structures.
16. The church will be God-dependant, as reflected in decision-making, vision and prayer.
17. The church will be congregational. While the church will elect and/or appoint leaders, and support them, the leaders will be servant-leaders, who will serve in the spirit of 1 Peter 5.
18. The church will be a sending church, preparing people for God’s call into various vocations and locations where they will be a blessing and asset to the work of Christ. The church will be sending missionaries, both short and long-term.
19. The church will be mentoring youth and provide them with meaningful avenues to serve the local church. It will also be seeking out and encouraging those on whom there is a sense of God’s gifting and call to vocational ministry.
20. The church will embrace, mentor and entrust emerging leaders.
21. The church and its members will enjoy a good reputation in their neighbourhoods and community.

Evangelical Free Church of Canada Our Character and Calling

The Evangelical Free Church of Canada is an association of autonomous churches united in a common commitment to God's evangel--the gospel of Jesus Christ, who died and rose again to give us eternal life. To God's glory, the gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. Our essential theological convictions are vitally connected to this gospel.

Our Character –

The Kingdom of God is His eternal possession, and is present in part but not fullness in the world today. By God's decree, under His direction, and empowered by His grace, the universal Church is responsible for the care and expansion of that Kingdom. Every local church, denomination, and ministry organization is a part of that Kingdom and carries some responsibility in the work of the Kingdom. As a part of that Body of Christ the Evangelical Free Church of Canada (EFCC) desires to understand and fulfill its particular calling in the work of the Kingdom. The EFCC will seek to live out our calling to be a New Community in Christ, reflecting the fullness of His vision for the Kingdom of God "on earth as it is in heaven." We will do this by putting aside the prevailing values of our time and replacing them with the radical demands of the gospel of God's grace.

Our Calling – ***"IN ESSENTIALS UNITY; IN NON-ESSENTIALS CHARITY; IN ALL THINGS JESUS CHRIST."***

The calling and spirit of the EFCC is summed up well in this famous motto of Rupertus Meldenius. We both define our call and express our aspirations for this 21st Century through this early quote.

"IN ESSENTIALS UNITY..."

Essential Truths -We are called to embody and proclaim the essential truths of Christianity as articulated in the Word of God, expressed through the centuries in the great creeds of the church and defined for us in our Statement of Faith. We continue in the tradition of our EFCC forefathers who said; "Where stands it written?" These truths have led us to Jesus Christ who said "he is truth" and that the "truth would set us free."

Spiritual Unity -This calling is to a spirit of unity in Jesus Christ, with an affirmation of the priesthood and ministry of all believers, congregational government in the local church where He is Head, meaningful involvement within our fellowship of churches, and cooperation with all who share our call to these essential truths.

"...IN NON-ESSENTIALS CHARITY..."

Generosity of Spirit -We are called to a generosity of spirit that frees us to embrace a wide variety of Christian brothers and sisters -- "simply believers" -- some with whom we will not agree in matters that are outside our Statement of Faith. Our spirit is one of warm welcome to all believers who share our commitment to our Statement of Faith and who seek to follow Jesus' command to love God and love our neighbour as ourselves.

Kingdom Minded -This generous spirit encourages us to joyfully work with those outside our own denomination, those of "like precious faith" who endeavour to expand the kingdom of heaven.

"...IN ALL THINGS JESUS CHRIST."

The Great Command and Great Commission -We are called to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, who is the Lord God. Through His grace and through His Spirit we seek to fulfill His command to love our neighbour by loving each and every person, especially the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed. We seek to fulfill His great commission by making followers of Him from all people groups.

Godly Living -From the practice and teachings of Jesus, from the present ministry of the Holy Spirit working within us, and from the pietistic model of our forefathers, has grown a spirit that hungers for a closer relationship with Jesus Christ that will transform our hearts, our heads, our hands, and will reveal itself in a Christ-inspired value system and a holy lifestyle.

Lower Pacific District of the EFCC

Our Mission:

"By God's grace, we are committed to encourage and resource our growing family of churches to reflect Jesus Christ."

What It Means to be an EFCC Church in the LPD.

As the Lower Pacific District, our greatest joy is to see your church flourishing, witnessing and being used to both make and grow obedient disciples of Christ. We are here to be an encouragement and resource to you and our longing is to see Christ honoured and reflected in our lives, churches and relationships!

While our district is here to be an encouragement and resource to your church, our local churches are also called to both work together and to work in the spirit and purposes of the EFCC. As our constitution describes it, our relationship is both, "autonomous and interdependent."

This document describes foundational principles that our district has as expectations for our individual churches. While this is not an exhaustive list, it is our conviction important that there is alignment in the following descriptive areas for both unity and mission fulfillment.

THEOLOGY

An Evangelical Free Church (**EFC**) accepts and adopts without reservation, revision, deletion or addition, the Statement of Faith of the EFCC as its Statement of Faith. *(As the EFCC National Conference of 2008 adopted a revised Statement of Faith, this may be either the new or the former).*

EFC pastors and elected leaders accept and communicate without reservation the Statement of Faith, and the membership accepts and lives in harmony with the Statement of Faith.

An **EFC** acknowledges differences in areas of evangelical theology not specifically addressed by the Statement of Faith and embraces with grace those within their fellowship and the denomination that may hold differing views.

SENSE OF MISSION

The mission of the EFCC is to "glorify God by serving in the birth and growth of healthy churches across Canada and around the world."

An EFC evidences a partnership in this mission by:

- A focus on the Great Commission the great Commandment.
- Multiplying healthy churches among all cultural groups, both at home and abroad, in obedience to Christ's call to be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

ATTITUDE

The EFCC in addition to a common theology also has a commitment to a common attitude. This common attitude is characterized by:

- A unity based upon the essentials coupled with freedom and charity in non-essentials.
- Being evangelical in theology and practice.
- Cooperating with others who are advancing the cause of Christ.
- Teaching liberty in Christ with responsibility and accountability.
- A balanced teaching ministry that engages both the mind and the heart.
- Interdependence through working with the larger body of the EFCC.
- Respect, appreciation and acceptance of people from different cultural backgrounds.

- Sensitivity to those in our congregations who suffer from social destitution, and compassionately addressing their particular needs to the best of our abilities.

These values are more fully articulated in the EFCC document, "Our Character and Calling." Please see Appendix "A."

POLITY

An EFC has the freedom under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to govern its own affairs in accordance with both the mind of Christ and the Word of God.

An EFC develops a local church polity that fits within the following parameters of congregationalism:

- The membership includes only those who have a personal faith in Christ (a believers church).
- The collective membership in a duly called meeting is the highest authority in the local church, exhibiting both a willingness to be scripturally accountable to the elected leadership and encouraging elected leadership to be mutually accountable to them as the ultimate authority in the local context. Moreover, members and leaders unitedly subscribe to a relationship covenant based on Mathew 18, giving priority to biblical patterns of conflict resolution and exercising biblical discipline within the context of Christian love and cultural sensitivity.
- Congregationalism is that form of government wherein the highest authority under Christ in a local church resides in the corporate will of the church membership and in which a realistic process and reasonable opportunity exists by which that corporate will is determined and carried out, especially as it affects such matters as:
 - Determination of membership.
 - Selection or appointment of the principal governing board (elder, deacon, etc.).
 - Selection of the senior pastor.
 - Approval or alteration of constitution/by-laws.
 - Approval of an annual church budget.
 - Approval of any major purchase or dissolution.
- An EFC has as its local polity a form of congregationalism that fits the size and demographics of the congregation.
- An EFC teaches that congregationalism includes the involvement of the entire body in ministry.
- An EFC entrusts much of the decision-making to godly leaders who are trained, trusted and allowed to lead.

CREDENTIALS

An EFC calls a pastor who either holds a credential with the EFCC or agrees with the EFCC Statement of Faith and ethos and makes a commitment to obtain an EFCC credential in a timely manner. If a credential is not obtained, the district will inform the local church as to why it has not been granted. This commitment acknowledges the church's alignment with the doctrine and practices of the EFCC.

COMMITMENTS

An EFC is committed to praying for and working interdependently with other local EFC's, the district, national and international ministries. This commitment is evidenced by:

- **Local:**
 - Willingly cooperating with other EFC's for local ministry initiatives.
- **District:**
 - Intentionally sharing resources with other district churches.
 - Being actively involved in district ministries.
 - Annually sending representation to district conferences.
 - Communicating district initiatives to the leadership and membership of the congregation.
 - Regularly inviting district leadership to address the leadership and congregation.
- **National:**
 - Bi-annually sending representation to the EFCC National Conference.
 - Communicating district initiatives to the leadership and membership of the congregation.
 - Endorsing and promoting Trinity Western University and Trinity Western Seminary as recommended schools for both students and the calling of pastoral staff.

- **International:**

- Endorsing and promoting EFCCM as our denominational international mission, and encouraging members to serve internationally with EFCCM.
- An EFC is committed to partnering financially in response to the needs/opportunities of the EFCC ministries. This is evidenced by:
 - Adequately paying and caring for their own pastoral staff.
 - An annual financial investment in support of district and national ministries with a yearly review of their participation of the recommended support levels for the district and national ministries.
 - Preferential consideration is given to the support of EFCC missionaries, Trinity Western Seminary and Trinity Western University.

(Rob Stewart, LPD Superintendent – as adapted from EFCA Southeast District document and policy)