

Women and Leadership in the EFCA

Thoughts on ways for women to glorify God through the stewardship of their leadership gifts within the church

Introduction

God Almighty has redeemed and called a people for Himself. He has given His people a clear mission to make disciples, to live in relationship together as His Church, and to bless the people around them. The beauty of the Church is seen through the profound redemptive and restorative work of Christ and through the grand diversity of people who comprise the Church. Within the diverse Church family, the Lord has given spiritual gifts and unique abilities and it will take all God's people using their gifts and abilities with the empowerment of the Holy Spirit to ultimately fulfill His mission for the Church here on earth.

For the Evangelical Free Church of America, it will take "all people on mission to all people" for us to see significant movement toward the fulfillment of our mission *to glorify God by multiplying transformational churches among all people*. It is essential that we more fully engage the rich diversity of individuals in the EFCA in the active fulfillment of our mission. The demonstration of ethnic, gender, generational, geographic and socio-economic diversity serving on mission together will make an incredible statement to a lost and broken world as well as be a genuine blessing in each of our lives. This truth is abundantly clear as we consider together how women can best glorify God through the stewardship of their leadership and teaching gifts within the local church to the accomplishment of the mission to which God calls us.

The history of the EFCA is filled with wonderful examples of godly women using their leadership gifts to advance the mission of our movement to the glory of God. Women like Josephine Princell and Ellen Modin were significantly used by God to see the Free Church grow in its early days here in the United States. Courageous and gifted women like Elizabeth Anderson and Hannah Hedstrom made an important impact in the establishment of mission work in multiple countries around the world.

As Becky and I travel to Free Churches across the country and to many of the places ReachGlobal staff minister around the world, we see the impact women leading and serving in the Free Church today have in advancing the gospel and growing the church. Yet, as we talk with women in our movement, it is clear many feel their gifts are not used well and they often struggle to find their place. They are not seeking to be ordained or to fill the role of senior pastor in our churches, but long for the recognition of their gifts and abilities. They desire to use their leadership and teaching gifts to build up the church and advance the mission of the EFCA as they live in obedience to the teaching of the Scriptures.

As I look around the EFCA, I see more opportunities for women to serve in leadership within the Free Church. Women have served for years on both the EFCA Board of Directors and the Trinity

International University Board of Regents as well as on district and other ministry boards. Opportunities for women to serve in leadership roles at the EFCA national office and in ReachGlobal around the world continue to grow. Four years ago, I appointed a Theology and Missiology Advisory Committee to serve the ReachGlobal Directional Team as they lead the mission. The committee has written an excellent paper entitled “Women in ReachGlobal Leadership Roles” that gives an overview of this issue as it relates to the international mission. (I have attached that document at the end of this paper.)

Women continue to move in increasing numbers into leadership roles in all fields. Many women in Free Churches across the country have significant leadership positions in the workplace, yet feel their leadership gifts have limited value and application in the local church. Certainly, there are opportunities within the ministries where women have traditionally led such as women’s and children’s ministries. God has used women serving in these areas in significant ways to impact people’s lives. However, not all women have an interest in or an aptitude for these ministries. For many, there seems to be little or no opportunity in the context of the local church they love to steward their leadership gifts.

The EFCA is grounded in the Scriptures as God’s authoritative and inerrant Word. Our understanding of this issue must be rooted there. It is essential that we handle the Scriptures well and let the Word guide both our understanding of what it teaches and the application to the current church situation. There are numerous books and articles on this subject written by godly men and women who hold to the inerrancy and authority of the Scriptures. They have looked at the same texts and have differing interpretations. The question before us is where does the EFCA stand.

The EFCA

I honestly would prefer different terms that we could use in this discussion other than complementarian and egalitarian. In hearing these words, all kinds of thoughts and ideas rush into people’s minds.

For the sake of our discussion, we must begin with some simple definitions. At its irreducible minimum, complementarians see some distinct roles and responsibilities for women and men in the church, while egalitarians see no distinctions in roles and responsibilities for men and women in the church. Within this definition of complementarianism, there are multiple layers and nuances with varying leadership and public ministry opportunities available to women.

With these foundational definitions in mind, and recognizing this is to some degree an either/or choice, the EFCA is a complementarian association of churches. However, it is important to note, one must not necessarily personally hold a complementarian position to be in an EFCA church or even to be credentialed by the EFCA, as evidenced in our recent doctrinal survey.

There is both a prescriptive and a descriptive dimension to this within the Free Church. Prescriptively, we are complementarian based on the 1988 EFCA Conference decision on

ordination outlined in “Ministerial Credentialing in the Evangelical Free Church of America.”ⁱ The Conference specified ordination in the EFCA as being available only to men and primarily, although not exclusively, focused on the role of senior pastor in local churches and those in pastoral ministry whose primary responsibility is preaching and teaching the Word. Thus, the role of senior pastor in the EFCA is a role reserved for men. However, it is important to note that in addition to the Certificate of Ordination which is available only to men, the EFCA does offer a permanent Certificate of Christian Ministry credential which is available to both women and men.

Descriptively, we are complementarian in that most EFCA churches conclude the biblical texts teach the roles of elder and senior pastor are reserved for men. Based on that understanding and application of the biblical text, it is encouraging to see a significant and growing number of our churches seeking ways to expand opportunities for women to effectively use their gifts and abilities to lead and teach within the church. This means more churches are hiring women to serve in a variety of ministry roles and including women in various leadership positions.

In our polity, beyond the Conference position on ordination and the role of senior pastor, local EFCA churches have the right and the responsibility to determine their understanding of the biblical texts related to women in leadership in their church and how to live that out in their local ministry context. This means that EFCA churches will have varying understandings and applications. It is extremely important that we exercise grace and humility toward one another and not make “right and wrong” judgements related to how congregations determine their local leadership structure and practices.

For example, some churches choose to assign the title “pastor” only to the men on their ministry staff while other churches give the title “pastor” to ministry staff, both women and men.

Those using the title “pastor” for only male ministry staff base their position on the New Testament terms “overseer,” “elder” and “pastor/shepherd” as referring to the same leadership office in the church, which is reserved for men. In this case, they choose not to give female ministry staff the title “pastor” to avoid confusion.

Those who use the title “pastor” for women and men on ministry staff often base their decision on a vocational understanding of the term not related to gender. In this case, the term describes the ministry role. Thus, they may use the title “pastor” for both female and male ministry staff.

In addition, EFCA churches have a variety of leadership and organizational structures as well as teaching opportunities where women serve and use their gifts to see the mission of the church accomplished. These are based on the local church leadership’s understanding of the biblical text and their local church context.

Framework

It is my intention in this brief discussion to clarify the framework for how we both understand and interact on this important topic. Like the frame around a picture, the framework for this discussion has four sides. The first is our deep commitment to the Scriptures as the inspired and authoritative Word of God. How we look at this issue must be shaped by the biblical texts. The second is the EFCA Conference decision on ordination focusing primarily on the role of the senior pastor. The Conference is the highest authority under Christ for the EFCA. Decisions like this by the Conference give clarity and direction for our movement. The third is the autonomy of the local church in the EFCA. Our congregational polity clearly gives local EFCA churches the latitude to determine how they are organized and who can serve in various leadership roles. The fourth is rooted in the grace and humility of our Lord Jesus. Inevitably, churches will land in a variety of places on the application of women in leadership in their local situations. It is essential that we demonstrate grace and humility toward each other and not look down upon or think less of those who do not hold to our personal position.

Conclusion

It is significant that no matter where a local church lands on this issue that leadership be intentional to open and create opportunities for women to use their leadership and teaching gifts within the church's understanding of the Scriptures. Rather than seeking to limit ways women can lead, it is important to open all the appropriate ways where they can lead, teach and serve.

We must acknowledge the gifts, abilities, perspectives and roles of both women and men as an essential part of the church in order for us to most effectively live out God's mission in the world. Honoring and affirming each other's gifts, respecting and listening to each other's perspectives, and championing biblically appropriate ways to serve together will strengthen the church and increase our effectiveness in fulfilling God's mission for the EFCA.

This is a critical and timely discussion for the health of our movement and the effectiveness of our mission as we seek to glorify God by multiplying transformational churches. In the days to come, we will provide helpful resources, ask pertinent questions, and lovingly shepherd this discussion so that we can reflect Jesus as we demonstrate both grace and truth (John 1:14b).

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¹ This document is a complete resource for understanding the purpose and steps toward credentialing in the EFCA. <https://www.efca.org/resources/document/credentialing-ministerial-credentialing-efca>