

What is Congregationalism?

Local Church Governance in the EFCC

Our EFCC Constitution declares that The Evangelical Free Church of Canada is an “association of autonomous and interdependent congregations of like faith and polity whose purpose shall be to glorify God.” Two things regarding governance stand out here: first, our congregations are self-governing yet choose to operate interdependently (especially when it comes to sharing the gospel and planting churches); and second, we have a “like faith and polity”. The like faith is “evangelical” and is summarized in our Statement of Faith. Our like polity is “Free” (historically, this means free from a state church and government control) and manifested through local churches that govern themselves congregationally.

Christian churches have organized governance in a variety of ways throughout history. Each governance model holds that ultimate sovereignty/Lordship of the church resides with Jesus Christ. However, each differs on how that authority is delegated from Christ to human leaders. In an Episcopal Church, authority resides with the Pope or an Archbishop/Bishop. In a representative model such as the Presbyterian Church, elders rule the church but are also responsible to a regional presbytery or synod. In a Brethren Church, the authority resides solely with the elders (chosen by existing elders) of the local church.

In a Congregational church, authority resides in the corporate will of the church membership. The EFCC is a “believers’ church”, hence our churches insist that all members must confess a personal faith in Jesus Christ. At minimum, members corporately exercise authority over issues such as membership (both settling on the qualifications for, as well as voting on, member applicants), selection of the church governing board, the choosing of a senior pastor, the approval of church constitution/bylaws, the setting of an annual budget; and decisions on major purchases (such as facilities).

While one can make a case that each governance structure has biblical precedent, we believe the congregational form of government to be the most accurate reflection of what is described in the New Testament. Jesus Christ alone is the head of the church so there is no need for intermediaries between the body and its head. Hence the local church has the right to appoint officers and give them authority to make a wide range of decisions. Congregationalism also exemplifies the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, mandating that all believers in the church serve Christ and His mission and maintain pure doctrine and right practice.

Hence, in EFCC congregations, authority resides with the congregation (under Christ). The congregation then recognizes God’s call and gifting on individuals’ lives and appoints those people to lead. In essence, the congregation delegates authority and responsibility to these leaders. Leaders are accountable to God and members for how they lead/serve the people. However, the corporate will of the members can rescind the authority given to leaders. Likewise, each member is responsible to God for how he/she follows/serves their leaders. This reflects servant-leadership as modeled for us by Christ. Each local church has the freedom to determine how to live out congregationalism. Some congregations (especially larger churches) will delegate most decisions to staff and leaders (voting on only the issues noted above); some will mandate that members be consulted and asked to vote on most decisions. The church is not a democracy where every individual demands their right. Jesus is Lord, so each individual is called to die to self and graciously give up his/her rights for the sake of Christ’s church. Hence, in a Free Church everyone has a say, but not everyone can have his or her way – the corporate will is what prevails.

As a group of like-minded churches, we – the Evangelical Free Church of Canada – are like-minded in faith, polity and calling! We serve to carry out the Great Commandment and Great Commission with far greater Kingdom impact together than we ever could alone.