

What We Are “For” & What Drives Us Forward

By: Dana Allin



ECO is committed
to growing and planting
flourishing churches
that makes disciples
of Jesus Christ.

In January 2012, after ECO officially launched at the Orlando National Gathering, the clerk of session at my church came to me with tears in his eyes. We were in the midst of denominational discernment at the time, and he said to me: "Dana, I used to feel relieved at the possibility of leaving our denomination. But now I am absolutely ecstatic about where we are going to!" I loved this moment. It was a great affirmation for the work our ECO polity committee had devoted to enacting the vision and values originally lifted up at the Minneapolis gathering six months before. And as I travel to churches around the country today, I continue to see sessions and congregations invigorated primarily by a vision for what's *ahead*.

Unfortunately, sometimes the story of ECO is framed the other way. Some people--and often the media--still paint ECO and our member churches as fundamentally reacting against gay ordination. This simply is not true. It is important to remember that the [initial White Paper](#) that talked about a new Reformed body and invited people to the Minneapolis gathering was written in January 2011, before there was a change in ordination standards. The authors of the White Paper cast a vision for churches devoted more to mission, ministry, and connectionalism instead of internal dynamics. From the start, ECO has been a movement grounded in what we are *for*, not *against*. And we need to keep remembering the core things we are "for" that propel us forward.

We are for ministry that promotes evangelism and justice. Too often there has been a dichotomy between people who want to share the Gospel with those who don't know Jesus and people who seek to engage in social justice. But the idea of justice in Scripture is about restoring what has been lost or damaged in the fall of Genesis 3. In the fall we see physical brokenness--brokenness within personal relationships and among structures, and of course brokenness in our relationship with God. The good news of the Kingdom of God offers restoration in all areas. I am so impressed with the number of churches involved in local ministries of compassion, not only to provide basic needs but to help rebuild lives. A number of ECO congregations are involved in International Justice Mission to stop human trafficking or provide aftercare ministries to those coming out of trafficking. As God calls us to love Him with our heart, soul, and strength, it draws us to love our neighbor as ourselves. This always includes tangible acts of mercy while also fulfilling the Great Commission to make disciples in Jesus' name.

We are for church planting and multiplication. In a [recent article in The Layman](#) about the 100th church joining ECO, I was correctly quoted as saying I am happy we have taken in 100 churches, but I will be even more elated when we have planted our 100th church. ECO's focus isn't on growing market share through transfers; our focus is on multiplying new disciples, leaders, and churches. ECO is also not recruiting or campaigning for churches; we only respond to congregations that make contact with us.

We are for creative, innovative, nimble, entrepreneurial, risk-taking ministry. As I travel to churches, I often do a presentation on ECO polity entitled, "Where Have the 'Shalls' Gone?" The "shalls" are those things congregations and leaders are required to do or not do. I remind people that some of the things that are "shalls" in other denominations are covered in ECO with words like "ordinarily," "may," or "it is appropriate to." One of the things I hear Anna Kent, our Director go Mission Affinity Groups, say is: "Our 'shalls' are now the things that are life giving!" That means "shalls" include participation in Mission Affinity Groups and Pastor Covenant Groups, because those foster life. ECO's flexibility also allows us to take greater risks and learn from people in a variety of tribes regarding ideas and practices for ministry.

We are for deeper relational connection. Sometimes people ask, "What kinds of churches does ECO *not* accept into membership?" The answer is ECO is not a place for churches looking to be functionally independent. We exist to enhance what it means to be Presbyterian within covenantal relationships. We manifest this in a requirement for churches to be in Mission Affinity Groups and Pastor Covenant Groups. The only way flexibility and trust works is when we know each other more deeply, and when there is agreement around core essentials of theology.

Which is why **we are for center-set theology.** When I came into ECO, someone gave me a great analogy to illustrate this. Some ranches use fences to keep cattle from wandering where they shouldn't; other ranches keep ample fresh water and food in the middle of the property, which naturally draws cattle to the center for life-giving resources and removes the need for fences. ECO's theological essentials provide a foundational theological understanding that draws us toward a common core. Yes, these essentials provide some boundaries for belief and behavior. But I as I read and reflect on our essentials, I find them refreshing and life-giving to my soul and ministry.

For those of you in ECO, on your way into ECO, or who speak about ECO to others: let us continue to resist being identified with what we are against. Instead, let us emphasize and celebrate what God calls us to *do*, and to *become*, in our context and work.

For More Information:

Visit our website (www.eco-pres.org) for more detailed information on ECO's theology and polity.