



GUIDELINES
FOR YOUR
**PASTORAL
SEARCH**
COMMITTEE

REFORMED  THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

A mind for truth. A heart for God

GUIDELINES FOR YOUR PASTORAL SEARCH COMMITTEE

by Luder Whitlock, Jr.

Where Do We Start?

A search committee should be elected by the congregation. Its composition and size may vary considerably from congregation to congregation. Depending upon the size of the church, the best working number seems to be from seven to eleven people recognized for their spiritual maturity and discernment, in addition to holding key responsibilities. Larger committees are possible but can easily be unwieldy.

About half of the committee should be officers of the church; other large groups impacting the church's ministry should also be represented, such as women's ministries, music, and Sunday School. Try to achieve a broad age-span in the committee. Some churches include at-large members from the congregation; others make sure committee members have different spiritual gifts.

Once the committee is selected, they should have an initial meeting to solidify the group and begin to develop a good working relationship. They should also begin praying immediately for themselves, the search process, and the church.

Decide Who You Are And Where You Are Going

The most important step to take in beginning a search for a new pastor is for your committee to be absolutely certain about what kind of church you want to be. What are your present strengths and weaknesses? What are your priorities? How do you wish to grow? Use your church's Philosophy of Ministry to answer these questions. If you don't have such a statement, your session should devise one immediately and the congregation should adopt it.

Be thorough and honest about your church's condition – all churches have problems.

Once you are clear about the kind of church you want to be, you can more easily determine the qualities required for the next pastor.

Decide Whom You Need, Not Whom You Want

The next step is to develop a description of the pastoral leader best suited to help your congregation reach its goals. List the qualifications you want to see (including negative ones you wish to avoid), prioritizing them carefully. Include both spiritual and personal (personality, experience) qualifications, as well as gifts and abilities. Give the most important qualities heavier weight. List also the pastor's principal functions; these will relate to your decisions about who you are and where you are going.

A congregation needs ministers with different skills, gifts, and abilities at various stages of growth. Be sure that your church gets the person it needs rather than the one it wants. There is a difference! A church planted five years ago doesn't need another church planter; it needs a pastor. Look carefully at your philosophy of ministry to determine what is needed.

Don't choose a candidate because he is either exactly like or exactly opposite the former pastor. Often a "clone" has a very short ministry when the congregation realizes they cannot replace his predecessor. Conversely, when a committee calls a candidate to replace a pastor with weak skills in one area, they often concentrate only on calling his opposite. They tend to ignore completely the candidate's competence (or lack of it) in other areas. This is a sure way to create a new set of problems, possibly greater than before.

Your committee must discipline itself to eliminate candidates who do not fit your pastoral profile. Late in a search process, impulsive decisions are easy to make, and they usually prove unsatisfactory.

Make A List and Check It Twice

Armed now with a clear understanding of the church's goals and a pastoral profile of the right man for the job, compile a list of candidates from various sources, including referrals from church members, pastors, the denomination's stated clerk, seminaries, or trusted individuals.

Seek candidates who can adapt to the local culture of the community and church. Some ministers are flexible, while others are not. An inner city pastor might not do well in suburbia or a suburban pastor in a rural area. Different areas of the country have different behaviors and expectations. Concentrate on people from a similar background or who have the ability to adapt to various situations.

Take time now to defuse potential time-bombs. Decide up front what you will do with emotionally charged suggestions for possible candidates (relatives, staff members, interim pastors). Failure to clear this up at the outset can cause discord later and add greatly to search time. For example, interim pastors should be disqualified from consideration by the search committee. Study carefully the denomination's book of order to know what steps are appropriate.

Next, trim the list of names by carefully examining each in light of the criteria established in your church and pastoral profiles. A short list of candidates will now become the focus of a much more thorough and intensive investigation. Assess each candidate regarding preaching, pastoral, and administrative skills in addition to his spiritual and family life.

Dig deeply into each candidate's background. Check denominational yearbooks and make statistical charts of membership, profession of faith, giving, etc. over the space of his ministry. Ask probing questions: How effective has his ministry been? How has he gotten along with people? Do members feel he is accessible? How has the church developed? Has it grown significantly? Has his ministry been balanced? What have been the areas of positive influence? What are the attitudes of the community toward the pastor and the congregation? What are his wife and family like? Is he a capable administrator?

Go beyond primary references – those given to you by the candidate. No candidate in his right mind will give you negative references. Ask the primary references if they know anyone else to call for information about the candidate. There you are likely to get a more realistic appraisal of his gifts and weaknesses. Make an unannounced visit to the area to visit the worship service unobtrusively and, if possible, talk to people in the community about their assessment of the church.

Interview The Best Candidates

When you have narrowed your search to a small group of the best possibilities, make an appointment with each candidate for committee evaluation. Share and discuss the church and pastoral profiles, planning any questions well in advance. Let each candidate know what to expect from your committee and afterwards advise them periodically whether or not they have been eliminated from consideration. A failure to keep candidates informed may encourage the best qualified to drop out of the process.

The committee should then hear the short list of candidates preach in person by visiting the church unannounced or by asking for sermon/teaching tapes. If you visit, be sure to find out beforehand whether your candidate is in the pulpit that Sunday; otherwise, you may travel a long distance for nothing. You may want to send only part of the committee who can report their findings. If you request tapes, don't say "Send us three sermon tapes"; rather, ask for certain ones, such as the last four Sunday morning sermons or lessons.

A sermon observation form covering various areas can be helpful. What was the mood of the sanctuary before the service? Did the service run smoothly? Were the music, prayers, and sermon well-integrated? Was the Scripture clearly explained? Was the sermon easily followed? Was the congregation attentive? Did they bring their Bibles? Did they open them? Did the congregation seem to be healthy, enthusiastic, and happy to belong?

Conduct personal interviews with the short list of candidates and their spouses – at least one interview with all short list candidates and at least two with the primary candidate and his spouse. This can be done in conjunction with a trip to hear him preach. Some churches interview the candidate first; if this is positive, then they visit with him and his wife. The wife should be included in the interview process at an appropriate point.

Encourage the candidate to do most of the talking initially so the committee can listen and not influence his answers. Take notes, assigning a section of the interview to each member. Some committees divide the interview into categories, for example, general background, preaching, worship, family life, and personal life. At the end, arrange an exact date to get back to the interviewee.

In making a final decision, don't require unanimity from the committee. While it works for some churches, one member can slow down or stop the search process for long periods. Moreover, frequently a unanimous consent rule forces those with serious reservations about a candidate to suppress them just to end the search.

Pray

An essential ingredient to the entire process is heartfelt prayer – and a lot of it. The importance of prayer should be stressed regularly to the congregation, as well as to the search committee.

Be Discreet

Confidentiality is key to the entire process to protect both the church and your candidate from rumor. Total secrecy should reign within the committee. Pastors who are being considered should be free to discuss matters with the committee without any hint of discussion getting back to their churches. Any pastor you consider takes a significant risk in his own church. He must know from the beginning that you will honor him and communicate with him at home, not through the church. Be cautious in contacting references; the candidate must indicate when you can contact someone.

Having said that, however, the committee should communicate regularly with the session and congregation. Give general progress reports, using no names or locations. At this time you should always encourage members to pray for the committee and the entire process.

How Long Will This Take?

Don't get in a hurry. Setting too optimistic of a time frame will likely cause frustration. Choose godly people who are seeking the Lord's will, because they must be willing to serve for the long haul. Trust the Lord to direct you and patiently wait on His provision. Encourage the congregation to be patient, too.

Ten Common Search Committee Mistakes

1. Failing to check out a candidate's track record.
2. Requiring a unanimous recommendation from the committee.
3. Making a decision based on a first impression.
4. Choosing a candidate the committee wants rather than one the church needs.
5. Choosing a candidate who cannot adapt to the local culture.
6. Failing to evaluate the church's true condition.
7. Choosing a candidate because he is either exactly like or exactly opposite the former pastor.
8. Evaluating the candidate's sermons based upon one he has chosen, rather than ones chosen by the committee.
9. Having too large a committee.
10. Failing to be discreet and to maintain total secrecy during the search process.

Need To Know More?

Check these sources for more information:

"SO YOU NEED TO FIND A PASTOR..."

RTS Reformed Quarterly, Summer, 1999; pp. 4-7.
Write Reformed Theological Seminary, 5422 Clinton Blvd., Jackson, MS 39209. Phone: 601-923-1655. Email: shartley@rts.edu.

IN SEARCH OF A LEADER:

The Complete Search Committee Guidebook

By Robert Dingman. Order in multiples of ten from Lay Renewal Ministries, 3101 Bartold Ave., St. Louis, MO 63143. Phone: 1-800-747-0815.

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