

Nine Things to Know to Conduct a Successful Minister Search

By Mac Brown

Even in an ideal situation, hiring the right person would take a lot of work. The hiring organization would have a clear view of what it needs, have the people and processes in place to find what it needs, and have only a few people who must sign off on the final candidate.

In many churches, hiring the right member of the ministerial staff takes a lot of work *plus*. Competing priorities within the congregation can muddle the view of the “ideal” candidate. Only the largest churches have the people and processes continuously in place for finding the right candidate. Small churches simply do not hire ministerial staff often enough to warrant keeping the systems processes up and running. Often, the congregation must vote on candidates before hiring.

This article will share lessons learned by Highland Baptist Church in searching for a new youth minister, but it is written to benefit almost every church that has or will have a vacancy in its ministerial staff.

1. Build a Search Team, Not Just a Hiring Committee

Developing a search team is vital to the success of any search. Team members are committed to the outcome, not just compliant with its processes. Team members speak up and together have the ability to create a total greater than the sum of the parts. Several key issues must be considered when forming an effective search team. These include representation of key stakeholder groups, chemistry, and diversity of skill-sets and talents.

Developing a sense of team takes time. Search committees that try to rush the group’s conclusion by assuming that they are already a team will risk jeopardizing their success. Yes, the members may have gone to church together for years, but have they worked together under this configuration or on a project of this magnitude? Probably not. With time and leadership, the team dynamics will be established and each team member will find his/her own voice and way to contribute.

Highland’s team developed over time through two primary and often simultaneous means; discussing the search and eating together. The Highland team found that eating together gave team members a great opportunity to get to know one another on many levels in a relaxed but productive forum.

2. Organize Your Information

Decide in advance how the search team will process the information that comes in and goes out during the search. To be successful, search teams will need to develop processes for receiving, routing, and evaluating materials; communicating with candidates; and conducting interviews.

Search teams conducting an effective search will be inundated with information from numerous potential candidates who are at every stage of the process. Considering the small number of truly good-fit candidates available for any particular church, letting one of them fall through the cracks would set the effort back considerably.

A golden rule at this point is “Stay on top of the paper!” As an example of the types and amounts of information a search will generate, the Highland team processed 145 resumes, fifteen follow-up questionnaires, and eight videotapes, and interviewed five candidates before selecting its youth minister. At any one time the team was processing as many as fifty candidates!

Ensuring the search team has someone with relevant computer skills and organizational abilities helps significantly with this portion of the search. At a minimum, the person handling the administrative work will need strong word-processing skills, and it is extremely helpful for him/her to be proficient with spreadsheet and/or database applications.

3. Involve Your Congregation

Building congregational support begins on Day One of the search, not when the search team has decided upon the candidate it wants to recommend.

There will be a lot to communicate with the congregation early in the search (e.g., who is on the search team, glimpses on how the process will work, receiving feedback on what the church needs). But after the initial flurry, communication will be limited to key people... unless something significant and out of the ordinary happens.

Providing the congregation with progress reports from time to time from the pulpit, via newsletters, and in Order of Worship inserts will open the door for congregational involvement and increased interest throughout the process.

The need to communicate will accelerate again when the search team has decided upon a candidate to present to the congregation. At that time a search team will need to introduce – and “sell” – the candidate to the congregation. Complete information about the candidate must be in front of the congregation. Options to do this include distributing information packets containing resume and other submitted materials, facilitating face-to-face meetings between the candidate and key stakeholders and congregational leaders, and providing opportunities to discuss the candidate (in his/her absence) before the congregation votes.

4. Don't Rush It

Searching for a minister is a slow process that can only be completed successfully on God's timeline and with much deliberation. No doubt, search committee members will feel a great sense of urgency about their task, and they should; it could become one of the most important projects they work on. After all, people's souls are at stake. It is because of this importance, though, that the committee must not succumb to the sense of urgency and act hastily. Taking its time early in the search will help the search committee to develop

into a team. It will also help the team form (a) a clear understanding of what the congregation requires of the new minister and (b) at least the framework of the processes it wants to use to conduct the search.

The search committee at our church met for the first time early in December and did not submit its first classified ad until late February the following year! In the interim the team built the foundation that carried it through the rest of the process. The process ended when the new youth minister reported for work the following October.

It was hard to be patient- especially since five of the seven committee members have "Type-A" personalities- but it was the best route. The effective strategy was to first fully understand what the congregation needed, then develop an ad that articulated that need clearly, spend time identifying quality outlets to submit the ad, and finally submit the ads to all of the sources at one time.

5. Advertise, Advertise, Advertise

Many churches limit their chance of finding the right fit because they advertise in too limited an area. Churches looking for a full-time minister- whether a youth minister or senior pastor- should consider conducting no less than a regional search and seriously consider a national search. If the search team uses a deliberate approach concerning the media in which it advertises, it can spread the word effectively and inexpensively.

A primary issue is the cost. Highland communicated the job opening to sixty-six organizations (publications, seminaries, associations, other churches, Internet posting sites, and state conventions) while spending less than \$1500.

Developing the list of entities and confirming the contacts and their addresses took time early on and was an important part of the work that went into building the foundation described earlier. Having accurate information in a database proved very important because the Highland search team submitted its classified as twice before completing its search.

6. Look for Fit, Not for Bodies

To be truly successful, a search team's mission must be to "*Find the person who meets the identified needs of the church, not just the best person among those who have submitted a resume to date*" The search team must have a clear understanding of what the congregation needs. There are many methods for developing that understanding... and several important obstacles to watch out for.

Methods for developing an understanding of the church's needs include facilitated discussions with key stakeholder groups, individual interviews with staff and lay leaders, and a review of existing job descriptions and congregational surveys. Undoubtedly the search team will refine its understanding as it processes the information it receives via these methods and through its discussion of the incoming resumes and materials. A colleague

frequently says this process is analogous to sharpening the focus on a projector: With each turn of the knob- or each discussion about what is needed- the picture becomes more and more clear. One step a search team may find particularly helpful at this stage is to develop a new job description, so that the search team has a fairly objective yardstick with which to measure all incoming materials from potential candidates.

Avoid accepting a list of applications and simply choosing the best from among them. Because our team took time to clearly understand what the church needed, the team was able to evaluate each candidate with that standard. Once the team decided not to continue processing a candidate, it promptly thanked the candidate for submitting his/her information, communicated that it did not see the fit, expressed genuine good wishes for the candidate's search, and moved on. This is a completely different mind-set from collecting a pile of resumes and taking the best one in the lot.

Avoid being too heavily influenced by the past. If the previous person in the position was especially successful in a particular area, the search team may try to find someone identical to that person. Conversely, if the last person was unsuccessful in a particular area, search teams commonly look for someone who is the opposite of him or her. Consider the following three points:

- The successful candidate will have to develop his/her own relationship with the congregation. It is unfair to put too much emphasis on how he or she compares to his/her predecessor's strengths and weaknesses.
- The church needs to hire someone with an eye toward the present and future, not the past.
- Each church, just like each candidate, has its own strengths, weaknesses, needs, and abilities. Finding the perfect match takes time and effort.

7. Share the Work Load

Search teams that distribute that work effectively stand to benefit in several ways. First, sharing the work load contributes to meaningful search team involvement. This, in turn, contributes to the search team's commitment. Second, if the work load is not shared, the person doing most of the work runs the risk of burnout, which can ultimately harm the process, as well as that person.

Ensuring that the work gets assigned, distributed, and completed is the work of the team captain or chair. Other work of the chair includes listening to the team, ensuring all team members receive all the tools and information they need in a timely manner so they can do their job, and removing barriers that stand in the way of team member's ability to complete their tasks. It is not unfair to say that the success of the search depends largely on the success of the chair experiences in his/her role.

Part of the chair's responsibility is to ensure that each of these areas is assigned to someone who has facility in and enthusiasm for that area. It would be counterproductive for the chair to ask a team member who has limited computer skills to take on the administrative component, just as it would be counterproductive for the church to ask someone with poor communication

skills or limited time to commit to chair the team. It is vital that the skill sets and resources of the individual match the duties of the role he or she is asked to take.

8. Do Your Research!

“Trust... but verify.” The stakes are too high and the potential negative consequences too great to do otherwise. Search teams that are tentative about checking backgrounds of their “short list” candidates make the church and community vulnerable to abuse.

Because churches are not-for-profit organizations whose purpose is to instill value systems in their members, the U.S. Supreme Court* has said they can have a longer leash than many other types of organizations to check out the beliefs and backgrounds of those they are considering for employment. Use every inch of that leash! Ask candidates about their ideology and theology. Inquire about their age and marital status. Ask them to submit a videotape. Remember, the search team’s job is to find a fit, and these issues are relevant and important to that purpose.

Obtain the candidate’s permission to conduct a background investigation. Check his/her personal references. Consider hiring an outside consultant to research and verify records pertaining to the candidate’s previous employment, education, criminal record, credit, and driving history. Job seekers (even ministers) are notorious about “forgetting to mention” potentially damaging information when searching for a job.

Having said that, it is also important to remember that just because a search team learns something “bad” doesn’t mean it should eliminate the candidate from contention. Learning something that could be a problem merely means the team and the candidate need to have an open conversation about whatever items turn up. Then the search team can decide whether to continue considering the candidate.

9. Keep Searching Until the Candidate Reports to Work

Searching for the right candidate is a process filled with ups and downs, near misses, and false starts. The main point is to find the person that “fits” the congregation. Along the way the team may have to revise many of its assumptions. The Highland search team started with a bias toward finding a dynamic youth minister because it felt the youth program would benefit with someone who could breathe enthusiasm into it. When the search team first interviewed the person it ultimately hired, that person’s seeming lack of “dynamism” was an issue the team grappled with mightily. The team thought, debated, and prayed about the candidates “fit” with the church’s needs. It did all of the work described above- and then some- and decided that the person was an excellent match for our ministry needs. Today, Highland could not be happier with the decision. The new staff minister is working as God would have him work... and it happened all on God’s timeline.

*Other countries may have different laws. For example, the Canadian Charter of Human Rights and Provincial Labor Laws limit or direct what Canadian church search committees can and cannot do. You are strongly advised to consult your denominational personnel guidelines and civil labor laws.

Neither the search nor this article could have been completed without the efforts of Joe Phelps, Highland Baptist Church's pastor; and search team members Mary Burks-Price, Matt Ridge, Timmi Hagan, Vaughn Pruett Bell, Phoebe Delamarter, and Carol Collier. Thanks for your work.- Mac Brown