

Finding a New Pastor: Beginning the Search

This is the first of a three part series on the Pastoral Search Process. It is not intended to be a detailed guide, but to give an overview of “best practices” on major elements of the search process for a new minister.

The church’s constituting documents usually give broad guidelines to church leaders regarding the formation of a Pastoral or Ministerial Search Committee. The documents may define who and how many members may serve on the committee, but seldom give much detail. It is best if the search committee is representative of the congregation. To whatever extent possible, each group (age, interest, function) should be represented. The method for the search itself is most often determined by the search committee.

The NA’s Division for Ministry (DFM) has developed a “Pastoral Search Committee Packet” which is available through the NA office. Contained in the packet are several resources and articles, a Church Information Form (CIF), a sample Minister’s Information Form (MIF) and, most importantly, “A Handbook for Pastoral Search Committees.” This handbook, originally compiled by the Rev. Phil Jackson, is continually modified to reflect emerging “best practices.” It offers search committees a time tested methodology with fairly detailed information about each step in the process.

In most cases, the first order of business for a newly formed search committee is to find an interim minister. Interim ministry has become a specialty. Many who enter it have taken specialized training to enhance the effectiveness of their service during this transitional time in the life of a church. Others rely on their years of experience as a pastor to equip them for the task. Our office maintains a list of interim ministers which is available upon request.

One of the most commonly asked questions is if the interim minister should be allowed to become a candidate for the permanent position. My answer is always no. There are numerous reasons why this is not appropriate. I will mention only two. First, the function of the interim is to prepare the church for its new pastor. That preparation process will be short circuited, and it may become self-serving for the interim-as candidate. Secondly, the search committee will lack objectivity as it reviews other profiles and interviews other candidates.

Now, having said that, I need also say that pastors who have served a church as a “fill in” or as “pulpit supply” and even as an interim minister, have become the settled pastor and some have had long and meaningful ministries. Regardless, as a “best practices” method, an interim should not be a candidate for the permanent position.

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