

Finding a New Pastor: The Interview Process

In my first two articles, I wrote about beginning the search process and surveying the congregation so the Church Information Form offers an accurate “picture” of the congregation for potential candidates. Once the tasks mentioned in the first two articles are completed, the committee is ready to receive, review and evaluate Minister Information Forms.

Next to finding a new minister, the most important task of every search committee is confidentiality. Indeed, it not only ranks second in importance, but third, fourth and fifth as well. The names, locations, qualifications, even hobbies and interests, of ministerial candidates must never be spoken of outside the search committee members. I cannot emphasize this enough. The current ministry of a candidate may be effectively ended if his or her congregation hears that their pastor is “looking.” We are a small Association and the grapevine is ubiquitous. Candidate profiles should be received at a committee member’s home address, not at the church. I even recommend that any photo copying of candidate material be done outside the church. It is too easy to accidentally leave sensitive material in the church office.

Having emphasized confidentiality I must also emphasize communication. The congregation needs to be regularly informed about the committee’s progress. This can and should be done in multiple ways including a monthly announcement during worship. The number of meetings held and the statistics of ministerial profiles received, retained and rejected is appropriate, but no further information about candidates should be given. In addition to communication with the congregation, communicate with the candidates. Let them know that the committee has received their profile. Moreover, let a candidate know when he or she is no longer being considered for the position. Too many of our clergy discover they’ve been eliminated when they read that the Rev. Betterthanme has been called.

When reviewing ministerial profiles be consistent in the process of retaining and rejecting profiles at each stage of the search. All members of the committee should review every profile and have input on each decision. When the committee comes to the point of interviewing the top five to eight candidates, use the same method and format. Start the conversations with the same questions and see where the candidate takes the discussion. At this stage it is best to use telephone interviews for all candidates, even if one or two are close by and could be interviewed in person. This levels the “playing field.” When the committee comes down to the top two to four candidates, interview them all in person. Again try to start with the same format for each and see where the conversation goes.

Once the top two or three candidates are identified the committee must go about the hard work of reference and background checks. Contact every reference listed on the on the Minister’s Information Form. Ask each reference the same set of questions at the start the conversation. Ask each reference for a secondary reference on the candidate but do not contact the secondary references until the candidate becomes the committee’s first

choice. It is a “best practice” to do a criminal background and credit check on the top candidate. The NA has arranged discounted prices with www.rapsheets.com, a national company with access to every criminal database in the country.

If a search committee follows the “best practices” outlined in these three articles and detailed in the Pastoral Search Handbook, the search process itself goes smoothly and the resulting ministerial candidate is more likely to be a good match for the congregation. Following these procedures greatly increases the possibility of a long-term pastorate that is filled with deep and meaningful relationships throughout the congregation and a fruitful ministry of growth in numbers, discipleship and wisdom.

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