

National Association of Congregational Christian Churches

8473 S. Howell Avenue – PO Box 288 – Oak Creek, WI 53154-0288
(414) 764-1620 – (800) 262-1620 – FAX (414) 764-0319 - naccc@naccc.org – www.naccc.org

SEARCHING FOR A MINISTER: A CHURCH OVERVIEW AND GUIDE TO BEST PRACTICES

Your Partnership with the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches (NACCC)

The NACCC exists to offer services to member churches. This handbook will acquaint you with available resources regarding pastoral search and personnel issues and offer some “best practices” in those areas.

Finding a New Pastor: Overview of Best Practices (from a series of articles by Rev. Dr. Donald P. Olsen)

A church’s constituting documents usually give broad guidelines to church leaders regarding the formation of a Pastoral or Ministerial Search Committee (sometimes called a Pulpit 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.

In most cases, the first order of business for a newly formed search committee is to find interim leadership. Intentional Transitional Ministry (ITM) has become a specialty. Many who enter it have completed 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 pastors to equip them for the task. Our office maintains a list of ITMs which is available upon request.

One of the most commonly asked questions is whether the ITM should be allowed to become a candidate for the permanent position. The answer is no. First, the function of the ITM is to prepare the church for its new pastor. That preparation process will be short circuited, and may become self-serving for the ITM as candidate. Second, the search committee will lack objectivity as it reviews other profiles and interviews other candidates. Having said that, some pastors who have served a church as “fill in” or “pulpit supply” and even as ITMs, have become the settled pastors and some have had long and meaningful ministries. Regardless, as a “best practice,” an ITM should **not** be a candidate for the permanent position.

The search committee has a good deal of homework to complete before candidates should be interviewed. Before the full Church Information Form (CIF) can be completed, the search committee must have a good understanding of the congregation’s make up and its expectations for the new pastor. This is a critical part of the search as the CIF is the first bit of information most seeking pastors will see. A well prepared CIF will offer a concise “picture” of the congregation and its needs. A congregational survey is often the primary tool to accomplish this.

The congregational survey should include questions about the age groups, occupations, interests and ministerial expectations of the congregation. It should also give the respondents opportunity to reflect on theological questions. NACCC member churches represent a very broad range of theological understandings and positions. It is important to be clear about the theological position and culture of the church. Accurately communicating such information is no small task. It may be wise to call a congregational meeting to review the interpretation of members' responses before completing the CIF.

The search committee also needs to spend time shaping the compensation package. In most cases the Trustees or fiduciary board have a determining voice on what the church can "afford" in salary. The search committee should discover the compensation of a local educational professional, holding a master's degree. This may offer a meaningful benchmark. Health and disability insurance, retirement, and payroll taxes (FICA) should also enter into the discussion of compensation.

Models for contracts/covenants between a church and minister are available on the website. They contain various benefits the committee should consider such as housing, vacation, maternity leave, sabbatical and educational/associational expenses. A clergy shortage challenges every religious group, including the NACCC. It is important to offer the best compensation package possible. Offering additional benefits is a wise way to attract and keep a pastor.

The CIF is available in digital form. We encourage the use of the online CIF which, when completed, is viewable by seeking ministers on our password protected Pastorates and Pulpits website page.

Once the CIF is completed and posted on Pastorates and Pulpits, the committee is ready to receive, review, and evaluate Minister Information Forms. The Minister Information Form (MIF) is the primary means by which candidates introduce themselves to you. The MIF contains a great deal of information, but must be carefully interpreted. Take particular note of the lengths of stay at previous places of employment for trends of turnover or longevity. Be clear about the type of ordination the candidate holds (if any) and whether the candidate has completed the Congregational History and Polity Course. Review the Background Disclosure page of the MIF and raise any questions or concerns with the candidate.

Next to finding anew minister, the most important task of every search committee is confidentiality. The names, locations, qualifications, even hobbies and interests of ministerial candidates must never be spoken of outside the search committee. This cannot be emphasized enough. The current ministry of a candidate may be effectively ended if his or her congregation hears that its pastor is "looking." We are a small association and the grapevine is ubiquitous. Candidate profiles should be emailed to the search committee's designated email address. Even photo copying of candidate material should be done outside the church, if at all possible. It is too easy to inadvertently leave sensitive material in the church office.

Communication must also be emphasized. The congregation needs to be regularly informed about the committee's progress. This can and should be done in multiple ways including announcements 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 communicating with the congregation, it is imperative to communicate with the candidates. Let them know that the committee has received their profiles. 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. Someone Else" has been called.

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 is ready to interview the top candidates, use the same method and format with all of them. Begin 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." The top few candidates should be interviewed in person. Again, use the same format for each candidate and see where the conversation goes.

Once the top candidates are identified the committee must go about the hard work of reference and background checks. Contact every reference listed on the MIF. Ask each reference the same set of questions. Sample questions may be found in the Handbook for Pastoral Search Committees. Ask each reference for a secondary reference on the candidate but do not contact the secondary references unless the candidate becomes the committee's first choice. It is a "best practice" to do a criminal background check on the top candidate. The NACCC can help you do this. Additionally, the NACCC holds Minister Disclosure Files which can aid you in verifying a candidate's claims.

If you are calling a minister without extensive experience in *Congregational* ministry build into the terms of call that the minister attend a *Congregational History and Polity Intensive Seminar* and provide church funding to do so. The Center for Congregational Leadership can help you with this. Email the Dean of the Center, Rev. Dr. D. Elizabeth Mauro at bmauro@naccc.org, or call her at 800.262.1620 ext. 12 for more information.

Disclosure, Background Checks, and References

Thoroughly checking the documents, criminal background, and references of any pastoral candidate is not optional. It is the expected standard in all circumstances of employment, including churches. The NACCC can help. After conferring with the Division for Ministry, the Executive Committee of the NACCC approved a new **Disclosure Protocol and Policy** for all NACCC clergy as well as non NACCC clergy who may be seeking a call from a member church, wish to update their Minister Information Forms, and/or update ecclesiastical endorsement. This policy is now in place.

Most clergy who contact you through the NACCC have committed to a process of open disclosure. Ministers who apply to your church directly may not have done so. If you would like to know if a particular minister has completed the disclosure process, please contact Susan Carson.

You may request to see the contents of a candidate's Minister Disclosure File. Please submit to the NACCC an email or letter:

- naming the candidate and verifying that this candidate has been interviewed and is of significant interest.
- indicating that you have clearly and thoroughly read the NACCC Disclosure Protocol and Policy.
- indicating that you understand that you and not the NACCC are responsible for verifying the contents of the file.
- agreeing that the contents of the file will not be shared with anyone outside of your search committee.
- promising the file and any copies will be deleted or destroyed upon conclusion of the search.
- including the name and contact information of the person requesting to see the Minister Disclosure File.

We have partnered with Intellicorp, a company that delivers trustworthy, inexpensive, and timely background checks of clergy, staff, and volunteers for the NACCC and its members. Pastoral candidates who have completed a Minister Disclosure File have already signed a Release Form for Background Check. When you have serious interest in a pastoral candidate, you may request that the NACCC initiate a background check on that candidate. You will be responsible for the fee for this service. The NACCC will send an invoice to your church and inform you of the results of the background check.

Your candidate may not have a Minister Disclosure File on file at the NACCC office. If this is the case, he or she will need to download the Release Form for Background Check from the NACCC website, complete and sign it. It should be sent via fax or certified mail. If a Minister Disclosure File is not on file, we encourage you to expect that your candidate contact the NACCC office and complete the disclosure process.

Pastoral candidates should supply you with contact information for all references. Always call all references listed. Calls are preferable to letters. You can often gather better information through conversation. Look for further indicators by using “Google” or other search engines to research candidates. Contact schools to make sure the transcripts presented are legitimate. Check the academic rigor of seminaries by making sure they are ATS accredited (www.ats.edu).

If a search committee follows the “best practices” outlined in this handbook, and reviews and utilizes the other documents available on the website, the search process itself should go smoothly and the final 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.