

Constructive Approaches to Calling a Minister

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When a pastor search committee is working, it is the most important committee in the church. The decision of whom to call as senior pastor is one that has repercussions for generations. Calling any minister – from senior pastor to children’s minister – takes prayer and preparation.

Churches used to search for the best preacher for their congregation, and the denomination provided the few services needed to guide the process. Those were simpler times; today the search landscape has changed. It is far more complex. Denominations are no longer homogeneous; churches must depend less on seminaries for help; and the leadership skills required to lead congregations extend far beyond teaching and pastoral visits.

What is needed today to call a minister? Certainly, two things have not changed – whether for a senior pastor or a staff minister - every search process is unique and God’s spirit must lead the process. Members of the search committee and congregation should pray for spiritual guidance for the committee, the candidate and the congregation.

The other essential to calling a minister is establishing and adhering to a multi-step plan. The process should go in pre-determined phases. That way the committee can keep the congregation apprised of progress by reporting on what phase they are in without divulging a confidence. I recommend that a search proceed in set stages. These were developed for calling a senior pastor, but can be modified for any ministry position.

Stage One: Getting Organized and Acquainted

The committee must get to know each other by sharing prayer, faith stories, experience with former churches, pastors, etc. It is important that members bring forward any personal agendas and biases.

During this initial stage, the committee should select officers and establish the search process. It is important for the committee to determine exactly how they will make the final decision. Will it be a unanimous vote or a majority consensus? If the pastor is part of the committee searching for a staff position, will the pastor make the final decision? A coach or transition consultant can be helpful. Whatever the process, the committee must let the congregation know what is going on. Regular reports to the congregation and requests for prayer are essential.

Stage Two: Gathering Information / Self Study

This stage is crucial to calling a pastor who fits with the church. It is the same stage recommended for an intentional interim process. Although lead by a team of lay leaders and clergy, often with an outside facilitator or coach, the congregation does the work. Steps involve looking at a church's heritage – celebrating some parts, grieving and healing from others. It involves looking at the mission of the church – exploring the core values of the congregation – and clarifying vision. At every step of the search, the committee must seek alignment between the position for which they are hiring and the focus and mission of the congregation.

Leadership issues need to be determined during this second stage and connections with ministry partners/denominational alliances and relationships clarified. The direction of the church must be prayerfully considered and verbalized by examining the church's resources and core values. Once that is established, members of the leadership team can develop a profile of the church and its demographics as well as a leadership expectations profile describing the congregation's expectations for its next pastor. This phase must not be rushed. A congregation must know who it is before calling a leader.

Stage Three: Considering Candidates

During this time, the committee gathers names for potential candidates from church members and friends, organizations, seminaries and divinity schools. As the committee begins to read and prayerfully consider resumes, an outside facilitator can be helpful. There are resources to help the committee prioritize candidates relative to the pastoral leadership expectations developed in Stage Two.

Stage Four: Contacting and Interviewing Candidates

In Stage Four, the committee narrows the search to five to 10 high priority candidates, with the intention of interviewing at least three of those. A letter of inquiry sent to each asks about their interest, and includes the church, congregation and community profiles.

All interviews must be confidential, and the church should pay for travel, food and lodging. The initial interview should include the candidate's spouse and consist of carefully prepared questions. One important thing to learn about a candidate is their level of emotional intelligence. A candidate's ability to relate to people is as important as preaching ability or public persona.

A visit and worship in the candidate's church should precede a second interview. The committee should consider candidates one at a time and notify each in a timely manner as to where they stand relative to others in the process. By the second interview, candidates should be offered an opportunity to interview with staff ministers who accept the principle of confidentiality, and know that while their observations are important, the committee must make the final decision. The committee should ask permission to conduct criminal and credit checks, and should check references carefully, even "going behind" by seeking additional references.

In consultation with the stewardship committee, a compensation package should be prepared. In doing so, it is worthwhile to consider incorporating a sabbatical or study leave, vacation time commensurate with or greater than what the candidate has currently. Providing leadership coaching for your new minister is a wise way to encourage success. For new ministers, it is especially wise to offer coaching to help them transition from academia to the congregational environment. Some congregations provide in-church support teams. It is important to offer things unique to your congregation that can help your new minister to be successful.

In the third interview, the formal compensation package is presented – but not with the entire search committee present - and any lingering questions are answered. It is important to establish whether the candidate will accept if called. If so, then determine when the candidate can visit the church for congregational visits and a trial sermon.

Stage Five: Presenting the Candidate

Now is the time for the candidate to visit the congregation. A warning: be careful when releasing the candidate's name and biographical information to the congregation, as he or she will want to carefully inform the home church. Coordinate that timing.

This is an exciting time for the congregation. When the candidate visits, opportunities must be set up for meeting as many people as possible. Dinner with the deacons, breakfast with youth leaders, a congregational reception after church and lunch with more leaders.... Send the candidate home exhausted, and vote that very day. The next step is extending the congregational call as soon as possible and welcoming the new pastor.

Two items need to be emphasized about any search process. The first is to select the committee carefully. A strategically chosen committee, representing the various facets of the congregation, has more chance for success than a committee elected by popular vote.

The second item of importance is to treat every candidate with utmost respect. Retain confidentiality and let candidates know where they stand during the search process. Do not string anyone along. For a minister, investigating opportunities elsewhere is a secretive and emotionally draining process. Conduct a search with authenticity, integrity and confidentiality, and remember, ministers do talk to each other. If someone feels mistreated, it can hurt the reputation of your congregation.

The stages spelled out above are tried and true. For any search, it is important not to hurry the process. Skipping a stage can result in a bad fit. The process is spiritually deep and intensive, but I can promise that the reward is worth the effort.

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