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2016

Searching for a Minister

A CHURCH OVERVIEW
AND
GUIDE TO BEST PRACTICES

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Center for Congregational Leadership
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF CONGREGATIONAL CHRISTIAN CHURCHES

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

Your affiliation as an NACCC member church allows you to access the considerable services that are administered out of your national offices. This handbook helps you become acquainted with resources that are available concerning pastoral search and personnel issues and offers some “best practices” in those areas.

Finding a New Pastor: Overview of Best Practices

(from a series of articles by Rev. Dr. Don 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 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. The answer is always no. There are numerous reasons why this is not appropriate, but highlight 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. Having said that, some 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.

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 very

important 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 group, occupation, interests and the ministerial expectations of each respondent. It should also give the respondent the opportunity to reflect on theological questions. Our Association’s member churches represent a very broad range of theological understandings and positions. It is important to give as much information as possible about the theological frame and culture of the church. Accurately tabulating such information is no small task. It may be wise of the search committee to call a congregational meeting to review their interpretation of the responses before publication of the CIF.

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 survey has been mailed to church members, the search committee needs to spend time shaping the compensation package. In most cases the Trustees or fiduciary board have a determining voice in what the church can “afford” in salary. In most cases I suggest that the search committee discover at what level a local educational professional, holding a master’s degree, is compensated. This may offer a meaningful benchmark. Health and disability insurance, retirement and payroll taxes (FICA) should also enter into the equation.

The *Pastoral Search Handbook* contains a template for “Church-Minister Agreement” that contains various benefits the committee should consider: housing, vacation, maternity leave, sabbatical and educational/associational expenses to name a few. There is a clergy shortage which spans every religious group, including our Association. It is important to offer the best compensation package possible. In a tight economy, offering additional benefits is a common way to attract and keep a pastor.

Once these tasks are completed, the committee is ready to receive, review and evaluate Minister Information Forms (MIF).

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. This cannot be emphasized 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. Even photo

copying of candidate material should be done outside the church, if at all possible. It is too easy to accidentally leave sensitive material in the church office.

Having emphasized confidentiality 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 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 candidates, use the same method and format with all. 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 few 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 candidates are identified the committee must go about the hard work of reference and background checks. Contact every reference listed on the Minister's Information Form. Ask each reference the same set of questions at the start the conversation. Sample questions may be found in the Pastoral Search Handbook. 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 NACCC can help you do this. Information is provided in this handbook. Additionally, the NACCC holds for your inspection Minister Disclosure Files which aid you in verifying a candidate's claims. Information on how to access these files is provided below.

>Best Practice Tip: 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. Call 1-800-262-1620 x1614 or email naccc@naccc.org for more information.

Listing of Documents Available on Line

The Pastoral Search Handbook. If you are searching for a minister you will find this to be a valuable tool. This will take you through the process of establishing a search committee and how best to organize, communicate and successfully complete your search. You will find sample interview questions, letters and call documents there.

Articles. There are also several articles that will be important to read. They are:

- *Revolving Clergy Harms Religion.* By Gerald L. Zelizer. First Printed in USA TODAY on February 21, 2002
- *Nine Things to Know to Conduct a Successful Minister Search.* By Mac Brown
- *The Good to Great Pastor.* An interview with Jim Collins. Leadership Journal, Spring 2006
- *Congregation Confronts a Changing Ministry.* By George Judson

NACCC Disclosure Protocol and Policy. This policy describes the requirements that a clergy person must meet in order to be granted electronic access to the search system.

Sample Church Information Form can be downloaded at: www.naccc.org – Services-Member Churches – Pastoral Search Process

Sample Minister's Information Form can be downloaded at: www.naccc.org – Services-Member Churches – Pastoral Search Process

Other Helpful Documents and Downloadable Forms are available at: www.centerforcongregationalleadership.org - Pastoral Search.

Background Checks

In this day and age, thoroughly checking the documents, references and criminal background of any pastoral candidate is not optional; it is the expected standard in all industries, including churches. The NACCC helps you do this.

NACCC Disclosure Protocol and Policy. In order for a clergy person to be granted electronic access to the search system, he or she must file educational transcripts, proof of ordination, and a signed permission for a background check, among other things (for a full reading of the policy, click here.) This is called the *Minister's Disclosure File*. *While the NACCC collects these items, it does not check the veracity of the documents.* That is for you to do. However, these documents are open to your search committee's inspection and follow up.

>Best Practice Tip: Ministers who contact you through the NACCC electronic system have committed to a process of open disclosure. They have taken the time to collect information for your inspection. Ministers who apply to your church directly may not be on record with the NACCC in this manner. This will delay the work of your search committee while trying to obtain the requested information. A candidate's Minister's Information Form has a box to check indicating his or her Minister's Disclosure File is on record at the NACCC office. However, be sure to verify this by contacting the pastoral relations liaison.

Criminal Background Checks. We are in partnership with *Intellicorp*, a company that will be doing background checks of clergy, staff and volunteers for the National Association and its Churches. Association staff and the Division for Ministry have done research into three nationally-known companies which provide this service and endorse *Intellicorp*. *Intellicorp* is a company that will deliver trustworthy, inexpensive, and timely assistance for such things as pastoral searches (as well as newly hired Church staff, and volunteers in any number of church ministries and programs, such as youth workers, Christian education workers, church day care workers, etc.).

>Best Practice Tip: Pastoral candidates who have submitted to the NACCC their *Minister's Disclosure File* have already signed a permission form for a background check. If you have serious interest in a pastoral candidate, you may request that the NACCC initiate the background check on that candidate. You will be responsible for the cost of that check. As part of our agreement with *Intellicorp*, the NACCC will pay for this service up-front each time you use it, and then we will send an invoice to your church within a month. The NACCC will inform you of the results of the background check.

Checking References. Pastoral candidates will supply you with the contact information for references. Always call all references listed. Calls are preferable to letters. You can often discern better information through the dynamic interaction of a conversation than from the static words of a letter.

>Best Practice Tip: Look for more reference indicators than simply the names provided. Contact schools to make sure the transcripts presented are legitimate. Check the academic rigor of the seminary by making sure they are ATS accredited (www.ats.edu).

Do a search on the internet of your applicants. Go on the internet and type in the person's name, city, state, and see what the search engine comes up with. Don't use just one search. We recommend that you do a search on all four of these: Google.com – Bing.com – Yahoo.com – Duckduckgo.com. Often each of these will bring up different results. Pay attention to any "red flags" that you may see. Even though it may be uncomfortable, you do have a duty to your congregation to question the candidate about what you find if you choose to stay in dialogue with that person.

Minister's Information Form. The Minister's Information Form (MIF) is the primary document by which a candidate introduces him or her self to you. It contains a great deal of information but you must interpret what that information means.

>Best Practice Tip: Be sure to look to see if the "I have filed a Minister Disclosure File with the NACCC as required by the NACCC Disclosure Protocol and Policy" is affirmatively checked. Take particular note of the lengths of stay at all 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 attended a Congregational Polity course. Review the **Professional Code of Ethics** attached to the MIF and raise any concerns or questions with the candidate.

WHAT TO DO

To request access so that you may fill out a Church Information Form.

Contact the Pastoral Relations Coordinator to request access. Your account will be set up and you will be given step-by-step instructions to complete the Church Information Form.

To request an Intellicorp Background Check from the NACCC on a candidate of interest:

- Send a letter or email to the Pastoral Relations Coordinator, requesting an Intellicorp Background Check and the name of the individual to check.
- The NACCC will initiate the check on your behalf and bill you for the associated fees.
- The NACCC will forward to you of the results of the background check.

To request access to review a Minister's Disclosure File. All *Minister Disclosure Files* will be transferred electronically. 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 to them
- indicating that they have clearly and thoroughly read the NACCC Disclosure Protocol and Policy
- indicating that they understand that they 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 their search committee
- promising the electronic file and any copies will be deleted or destroyed upon conclusion of the search
- with the name and contact information of the person requesting to see the Minister Disclosure File

If a search committee follows the “best practices” outlined in this handbook, and reviews and utilizes the other documents listed, 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.