



# *Searching for a Minister*

AN OVERVIEW AND  
GUIDE TO BEST PRACTICES



## **Introduction**

Your church is experiencing a pastoral vacancy. Maybe it's happening soon or has already begun. The leadership of the church feels vulnerable and at risk heading into this season of uncertainty. As a member church in the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches, you have access to services and resources to help you navigate the journey toward a new chapter in your congregation's history and presence in the world.

It shouldn't be shocking to read that the world we live in today is more complex than in previous eras. A worldwide pandemic exposed more vulnerabilities in churches than could have been predicted following such a socio-political-medical event. Generational changes in church participation result in diminished activity among people under the age of 30. This trend causes a decline in young adults choosing the ministry as a vocational pipeline. Add to these social pressures a generation of clergy entering retirement years and we have a perfect storm of demand that feels like it exceeds resources.

Search committees, who previously depended on an abundance of applications for finding quality clergy, must now search smarter. The process has become more art than science. The art of finding a pastor now includes creative sources for affirming those who desire to serve the church or their faith.

## **First Steps**

When a congregation learns there is a pending pastoral transition, their first step should be to consult constituting documents. The church constitution and by-laws will often provide, in broad terms, how the leadership of the church can move forward with forming a search committee.

## **Saying Farewell**

Often the beginning of a search process includes saying goodbye to your present pastor. Providing a healthy farewell can be an exercise in congregational well-being. The opportunity to celebrate the years together with the current pastor might create a spirit of welcome toward a new minister in the months ahead.

A healthy farewell can also be the springboard for a quality transitional leader (an interim pastor) who will come alongside the congregation and help affirm the church's core values. An interim period can also reconnect local church leaders in owning the mission and work of the church.

### **Partnership with the NACCC**

As a member congregation within the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches, you have access to a team that will engage with your church during the transition. One of the programs our congregational leadership team offers includes interaction with Rev. Dr. Gerry Brannon Krupp, Director of Programs, and Laura Wright, Church Services Coordinator throughout the search process. The NACCC helps each church navigate the pastoral search process successfully.

The NACCC will assist with foundational materials like congregational surveys, Church Information Forms, and the online search process.

In complex situations or when questions arise, the Director of Programs can engage directly to offer support to the congregation. We seek to serve our member churches in every way possible.

### **Establishing the Search Committee**

Each local church is responsible for the criteria determining who should serve on the search committee. Similarly, an ethical commitment should be reflected in how the search committee conducts its search and communicates with the congregation. Confidentiality balanced with good communication serves as a wonderful bracket for successful searches for the church. The scope of the search committee can be outlined by the congregation. For instance, the salary and agreement with the pastor might be established or negotiated by other boards/committees in the church.

The activity of the search committee should be regularly reported to the congregation. Reports can be made in the form of the number of meetings and ways the search committee is recruiting potential applicants. Knowledge of how many applicants have filed, and if applications have been rejected or accepted without additional details is also welcome. No personal information should be offered to the broader congregation until there is a final candidate.

There are three stages to the search process; 1) Pre-search; 2) Search; 3) Seal the Deal.

## Pre-Search

- *Congregational Survey*

There are a number of ways a congregation can be surveyed. All might be beneficial to understanding the congregation and their needs. Here are two options.

1. Build a picture of the mission and ministry in your local church context. How does the church describe its demographic profile? What is its sphere of influence? How would a leader describe surrounding neighborhoods (greatest need, socio-economic challenges, school district boundaries, township, city, village boundaries)? What is the church's culture: organizational structure, order of worship, and types of programs? Does the church make its space available to like-minded organizations in the community?

2. Identify the qualities, qualifications, practices, and expressed expectations of the potential pastor. This approach divides the role and responsibilities of the pastor into categories which the congregation ranks according to importance or value.

- *Interpreting the survey.*

Data collected from congregational surveys are gold mines to be excavated by leadership. There are a couple of ways to better understand the responses your congregation gives you. First, the kinds of questions the survey asks will determine the kind of information you receive in return. If the questions are "yes/no" questions, then your data will closely align with the answers to the questions you asked. If the survey asks open-ended questions and people can type/write in a response, the leadership team gains more insight into the hopes and dreams of the church. Then the challenge becomes parsing those responses for wisdom and direction.

In either scenario, leadership might use the congregational survey to facilitate a conversation at a church town hall meeting to digest ideas that have surfaced through the congregational survey. Such a congregational dialog will lead to a better understanding of the church and how to complete the online CIF.

- *Needs of Congregation versus kind of clergy available:*

We live in a new era. How congregations define the ministries of the church is changing. Church leadership should use the time between ministers to examine, clarify, and reaffirm the tasks, expectations, and roles of the clergy. A part-time pastor ought not to be dismissed without

consideration. Churches can think of a part-time minister as getting the short end of the stick. However, when a congregation is engaged and owns its various ministries the pastor can be more focused on the requirements for ministry that are best embodied by the minister.

*There are a couple of ways to understand part-time ministry.*

1. *Bi-vocational* – describes a pastor or ministry team where there is a second stream of income that makes up the household income. The presence of a second income stream is a requirement for success in this kind of arrangement.

2. *Co-vocational* – describes a minister who seeks outside employment to understand context and culture to better integrate faith and practice.

## **Search**

When the search committee meets regularly, the scope of their work has been established and the constitution and bylaws are followed, then the work begins.

If a **Congregational Information Form** (CIF) has not yet been completed, action needs to happen to finish this important step. The CIF is a formal outline of the systems, finances, and profile of the local church. The CIF is an online survey that reflects all the elements that comprise your church. Registering through, Laura Wright, who is our Church Services Coordinator, [lwright@nacc.org](mailto:lwright@nacc.org) will open the portal to the online CIF.

A completed CIF will facilitate an open pulpit posting on the NACCC website. The CIF will also be uploaded to our database allowing potential candidates to review it.

How does the search committee differentiate between curious inquirers and serious applicants? There is a difference between Recruits, Applicants, and Candidates. Historically, a local church has been able to post a CIF and receive a dozen or more applications. The pipeline has narrowed, and the search committee may want to take a more assertive approach to the pastoral search. An assertive approach would include recruiting a potential candidate to apply. The search committee can initiate posting the position on one of several non-NACCC pastoral search websites.

Search committees often don't differentiate between applicants and candidates. It's important to acknowledge that not every applicant is a candidate. The search committee determines when an

applicant moves into the candidate category. Web sources for search – (Ask Laura Wright for a list). Indeed, Churchstaffing.com, Headhunting agencies, Churchjobs.net, Jobs that serve/help search, etc.

As the search committee reads and evaluates each resume or application, it's important to communicate with applicants. Be gracious and honest with each person. Outline the process for them if they are still in the mix. When the search committee ends the process with a given applicant, thank them for their interest.

A current trend among search committees is to look more specifically within the geographical region of the local church to find a new pastor. This intentional focus will often lead to considering non-NACCC ministerial candidates as potential candidates. A checklist of pastoral expectations is helpful in eliminating the least desirable applicants. The following are categories to evaluate the nearby potential candidates.

- **High standards of education and experience.** Does the person possess a good foundation of theological education? Do they have experience in ministry? If minimal experience in ministry, are they open to mentoring by an experienced pastor?
- **Commitment to the Congregational Way.** If the search committee has identified a person outside the NACCC tradition is this person open to exploring the Congregational Way? Will they seek to understand and apply the Congregational Way to their philosophy of ministry? Will they seek to learn the unique culture of that local church and work through the congregation to discern the will of God and the well-being of the church?
- **Willingness to embrace the local church's covenant.** Sometimes when pastors come to a Congregational church, they expect a confession or creed will orient them. In the culture of the NACCC, the covenant is the guiding and centering statement that holds the church together.
- **Pastor's engagement with the NACCC.** Potential clergy who come from other religious/Christian traditions will sometimes misunderstand the function of an association. It's important to acknowledge that self-determining congregations have associational relationships and that the NACCC is designed to support congregations in the work they are called to do. Keeping Laura and Gerry in the communication loop will help the congregation by allowing the NACCC to build a relationship with the incoming clergy.

## Sealing the Deal

Interviewing Candidate (s).

1. Interview - The following is a suggested outline. Open with prayer, thank everyone for being present, introduce members of the search committee, give a brief overview of the church, indicate qualities that interested the committee in the candidate, and ask the candidate to tell a bit of their story (particularly about their call to ministry or their reason for applying).

a. The NACCC can offer suggested resources for coaching through the interview process. When asking questions, the focus should be on the mission and vision of the church, the various ministries/programs of the church, and the candidate's vision for the future. It is inappropriate for the candidate and committee to get into long discussions about matters where they might disagree. Follow-up questions and discussions will happen later.

2. If the initial interview goes well, then the search committee will decide whether to continue with this candidate. If the committee decides to continue with a candidate then the next steps will include, a check of references, possibly a second interview, a viewing of the candidate preaching (either video recorded or neutral pulpit), a consensus within the Search Committee, and planning a candidate weekend.

3. The congregation needs to vote on extending a call to the candidate.

a. Following a successful vote and the acceptance of the invitation by the candidate, agreement is necessary on the Terms of the Call. The Terms of Call is an agreement regarding the expectations and responsibilities of the pastor as well as the commitment of the church financially. Beginning a pastoral relationship with well-defined purposes helps to maintain a good understanding between the church and its minister. All the Terms of Call should be stated with clarity and detail to minimize misinterpretations and misunderstandings. Center for Congregational Leadership website: [http://www.centerforcongregationalleadership.org/uploads/6/0/0/9/6009825/sample\\_agreement\\_2018.pdf](http://www.centerforcongregationalleadership.org/uploads/6/0/0/9/6009825/sample_agreement_2018.pdf)

b. Salary and compensation package allows a church to grapple with the level of support they can maintain.

**Addendum:**

**The Interim becoming a candidate.**

The hard and fast line of excluding the interim minister as a potential candidate is now blurred. A well-trained interim is serving a role within the congregation and may not be revealing everything about themselves (Theologically, personally, professionally). However, over time it is easier and easier to discern the character and capability of the interim. It is natural for the congregation to ask what kind of minister their interim might make for the long term. It is up to the congregational leadership in general and the search committee specifically to discern whether the church should begin conversations with the interim about becoming a candidate for the position.

The NACCC recommends that an interim interviewing for the position of settled clergy, should at the time of official candidacy, step out of the role of interim and allow the search committee to do their work of interviewing, checking references, and securing search committee consensus. The search committee would be wise to exercise their full process of interviewing the interim “now candidate” to allow for an informed decision.

Often the interim process has given each party an extended opportunity to discern how closely aligned and mutual the two parties are regarding the covenant and mission of the church. Therefore, vetting an interim who becomes a candidate could be speedy.