

PASTORAL TRANSITIONS

(Considerations & Questions)

INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS:

Initially, we must recognize the purpose and scope of this material. I'm well aware there are numerous, more detailed undertakings concerning the material suggested by the heading. The purpose of this material, however, is to provide some very direct perspective regarding items which should be of primary concern for any fellowship in pastoral transition (or for the candidating pastors). I've included questions and perspective which, in my experience, relate to real issues within the local church. The scope of the material encompasses the practical much more than the theoretical.

We should also recognize that the particulars involved in the makeup of each church will often determine the responses to issues noted in this paper. Further, some of the items included may not apply, may not be viewed as important, or may be handled through another area of the process. Take what you find helpful, change when it seems wise and do all with the desire to honor God.

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THE ROLE OF THE SEARCH COMMITTEE

There are various terms used for this group such as "pastoral search committee," "pulpit search committee" and so on (with "board" sometimes substituted for "committee"). In this material I will refer to this group as the "**search committee**." It is not the intent of this paper to address this committee's makeup (you should consult the Constitution and By-Laws of your church as a starting point). The following items, however, directly affect the purpose and scope of the search committee and therefore are included:

- 1) The search committee must agree on what it's looking for before ever considering a specific candidate at all! If the Committee is not **agreed in philosophy and focus**, then discussion is in order before proceeding. It is suggested that you either come to agreement on your approach as a committee or change the members of the committee!
- 2) **Prayer** and **cooperative biblical discernment** are the keys for a process that will honor God. I suggest several sessions of 1-2 hours of prayer time prior to actually sitting down at the table and dealing with specific issues. Establish God as the key participant in your hearts and thoughts before dealing with any succeeding phase.

- 3) The chairman for the committee should be the **contact point, liaison and spokesman** for the committee. Open and regular communication within the committee and to the congregation is imperative. It is the chairman's responsibility to correlate all surveys, questionnaires and interview worksheets.
- 4) If the role of the committee includes "**pulpit supply**" during the time the church is without a pastor, be careful that anyone involved in this supply is NOT automatically assumed a candidate (especially by the congregation at large) simply because they are speaking. A specific announcement stating the speaker's being or not being a candidate should be made on each occasion.
- 5) The **level of authority** granted to the committee must be clarified. Can the committee schedule a candidate at its discretion or does the ruling board need to be involved at some level? (The ruling board may or may not be the same as the pulpit committee). Is the committee expected to "recommend" a candidate? If so, is the recommendation to the board or to the congregation?
- 6) The **methodology** of the committee needs to be **understood by the congregation**. I recommend the timely assessment of each possible candidate as the Lord brings them to the committee for consideration. I am not a fan of collecting a number of résumés, then "winnowing out the field" and, finally, asking the "top pick" to candidate. This is corporate American's process for CEO selection. Remember that prayer and faith in God's sovereign provision, certainly to be coupled with the committee's responsibility for discernment and wisdom, should be the spearhead for the process!
- 7) It is seriously suggested that the committee consider and come to a clearly understood **working agreement** on all items they deem important before going to the "let's bring someone to speak as a candidate" phase.
- 8) The Committee Assessment, Pastoral Priorities, and Questions for Every Candidate worksheets (see downloads) have room for **each member to write down their thoughts** -- which I highly recommend to avoid misunderstandings later on! In fact, I'd require written responses from each committee member if I were part of the process.

THE IMPORTANCE OF "COMPATIBILITY"

This is the very real, and extremely relevant, issue of the somewhat intangible matter of compatibility between pastor and congregation (and, more narrowly, the existing leadership).

For instance, what is the makeup, or "flavor" of the church? By this is meant (for example): Is the fellowship focused and intense or laid back and roll-with-the-flow? And to what degree of each? Does it have an urban, suburban, rural or backwoods flavor?

One consideration is the obvious one of not matching a three-piece-suit guy with a backwoods congregation! But that much is usually pretty obvious. However, problems can arise when the candidate wants to be back-woodsie and states his ability to do so! Can he or can't he? Want to take a chance? Further, how about his wife and kids? The candidate may have the desire, and perhaps even be convinced that he can adapt, but the family members may hate it!

Compatibility can be a tough item to pin down -- but I feel it's often a main reason that churches struggle regarding pastoral leadership. There has to be a "fit" far beyond doctrinal agreement and type of church government. Think about it beforehand rather than regret extending the pastoral call at a later time.

THE USE AND VALUE OF CANDIDATE REFERENCES:

I am somewhat dubious of the value of references. While they are sometimes helpful, I'd caution that you'll never get an unfavorable reference from a candidates list. Termed "the buddy system," the candidate will always list those from whom he expects favorable responses. The following are suggested:

- 1) Check every reference, preferably with **personal contact** (NOT merely mail or e-mail).
- 2) Ask every referenced person for **two additional references** -- and be sure to contact them! (You will get a more honest and much more complete picture with this "second level" than with the references on the résumé!).
- 3) When considering someone with a denominational background, be aware that **denominations** often project a "this guy is perfect because I'm recommending him to you" concept. The contact person (a director, regional head, area placement specialist, etc.) seldom has specific understanding regarding the needs of your fellowship. Nor will he have to live with the pastoral selection -- but you will!
- 4) If at all possible, have at least one member of the pulpit committee **visit the candidate's previous ministry** (or currently active one if applicable). I'd recommend an incognito visit. Such examination is not meant to deceive but to wisely discern the candidate's ministry skills *in situ* and is best done at the level of minimum intrusion. It is recommended to personally speak with as many people as possible to get comprehensive input.