

The HAB Approach to Pastor Search

By Jack Mitchell, Pastor Search Committee Chair

Introduction

After the sudden and unexpected resignation of our senior pastor in February 2005, the congregation of Hendricks Avenue Baptist Church (“HAB”) elected a nine-person search committee in mid-March. By April 1, the search committee was operational, and I was elected chair. On March 12, 2006, the congregation called Dr. Kyle Reese as our senior pastor. The search process had lasted nearly 12 months and had considered approximately 100 candidates and prospects. By all indications, the search resulted in a remarkable fit. The purpose of this paper is to outline the basic methodology and tools which we employed in the hope that our experience will be helpful to other churches that undertake a search for a new pastor.

Organizing the Search Committee

Before launching into the search itself, it is important to establish ground rules for the operation of the search committee. We devoted our first three meetings to creating our Rules of Order and our mutual covenant. The Rules of Order addressed such issues as what officers the committee would elect, the regular meeting schedule and the procedure for calling special meetings, the number of required members in attendance to constitute a quorum, the procedure for voting on candidates and prospects, the number of affirmative votes required to advance a candidate in the process and the number of votes required to call a candidate. The Rules of Order also spelled out how and when we would communicate to the church as a whole. The time to hammer these rules out is at the beginning before the search actually begins. To facilitate the process, I presented a “model” set of rules I found in a pastor search publication as a starting point. However, as a result of our deliberations and negotiation, our end product, which was adopted unanimously, differed considerably from the starting point. We were rewarded for the effort we put into the Rules of Order by the fact that we never encountered a situation during the following 11 months of our search that was not clearly addressed by our rules. Upon request, we will be happy to share the rules that we created.

We also created a Covenant—a set of promises that we made to each other. Among other things, we each agreed to pray daily for our church, for each member of the search committee, and for the search itself. We agreed to make it a priority to attend every meeting and to be punctual. We promised to treat all candidates, candidate information, and the internal workings of our committee as strictly confidential, to be honest and forthright in our assessment of each candidate, and to be supportive, nurturing, and encouraging of one another. Again, upon request, we will be happy to share our Covenant.

My strong advice is not to skip this step or skimp on it. Search committees sometimes disintegrate and become dysfunctional because they cannot agree on how to proceed when in the middle of the search. The time to anticipate procedural issues and to reach agreement on how they will be dealt with is at the beginning.

The philosophy of our search

We began our journey with the conviction Hendricks Avenue Baptist Church is God's church, not ours, and that He had a pastor for us somewhere. Our job was to use the abilities God had given us to locate that pastor and not allow our own preferences and biases to get in the way.

This sounds terribly idealistic and pious, but we discussed this philosophy at length as we worked on our rules and covenant and agreed that it was true. In the spirit of candor, I must admit that some of us were more convinced than others.

One of the realities of a search is that almost every member has opinions about what the next senior pastor should be like. There is nothing wrong with that, provided each member of the search committee is open to God's leading. As we worked our way through the search and encountered the usual twists and turns, we continually reminded ourselves of this philosophy.

The identification of prospects and the solicitation of candidates

One of the most fundamental questions for any search committee is what process will be used to locate prospects and candidates. This question should be addressed as the search committee creates its Rules of Order. Four of our rules dealt with this issue:

- *The committee will accept only written recommendations for prospective candidates. Persons who wish to make a recommendation will be asked to provide a resume for the candidate, or if that is not possible, to complete a data sheet on the recommended candidate. (We designed a candidate information sheet for this purpose.)*
- *We will solicit recommendations from the congregation. (We did this early in the search process and set a cut-off date of June 1, 2005 for the submission of such recommendations. We received only two or three recommendations from church members, but the important thing is that members felt they had been given an opportunity to participate.)*
- *We will advertise nationally in selected publications that reach the type of ministers who fit our profile. (We believed that the congregation expected us to conduct a "national search" and advertising in widely circulated publications such as *Baptists Today*, *Christianity Today*, *The Biblical Recorder*, and *The Baptist Standard* would fulfill those expectations.)*
- *We will solicit recommendations from a small group of trusted moderate Baptist leaders who know our church well and who are well connected in Baptist life, recognizing that prospects recommended to us may have no interest in our position. However, if we become convinced that a prospect is a good fit, we will do our best to persuade the prospect to be open to this opportunity as a possible call by God.*

Our best candidates came from this small group of trusted Baptist leaders. We invited such well-known Baptist leaders as Dr. Hardy Clemmons, Dr. Randall Lolley, Dr. Larry McSwain, Dr. Rob Nash, Dr. Brad Creed, and Dock Hollingsworth to serve on what we called our "Advisory Cabinet." All were well acquainted with our church, and Drs. Lolley and McSwain had previously served interim pastorates at HAB. Their only duties were to provide

us with a list of prospective candidates and to periodically comment on the progress and direction of our search.

A search committee has basically two choices with respect to candidate identification. First, it can advertise its opening, wait for the influx of inquiries and resumes, and select the best of the respondents. Or alternatively, a search committee can network aggressively in order to identify prospective candidates who in the judgment of those who know both the prospect and the church would be an excellent fit. The search committee must then do its best to persuade these prospective candidates to be open to the opportunity. Although we advertised our position, principally because we believed the church expected us to advertise widely, we relied essentially on the second option. Our ads attracted 70 resumes, but in the end, our top 12 candidates came from the 20 names that were submitted by our Advisory Cabinet.

In part, our decision to emphasize the second approach to prospect identification resulted from my business experience as chairman of a major bank. In that role, from time to time I found it necessary to hire senior executive talent. I always did this by networking in effort to discover the very best executives for the particular position I was filling. I never considered simply advertising the position and working from the candidates who submitted resumes. All too often experienced leaders who are looking to change jobs are not performing well in their current position. In many cases the best fit is someone who is quite happy in their present assignment and who has given no thought to looking for another job.

Whether this approach can work for any particular church depends to a large degree on the search committee's ability to access strong Baptist leaders who are knowledgeable enough about the church to make well-informed recommendations.

Obtaining input from the congregation

We were fortunate that two surveys of our congregation had been conducted within the previous 36 months. The older survey had been a tool of the previous pastor search committee. The second survey was less than 18 months old and addressed issues such as the choice of music, preferred worship styles and worship orders, and the roles of our various staff ministers. Because we had access to the results of these surveys, we concluded that no additional survey was needed in connection with our search.

Instead of a new survey, we chose instead to conduct a series of 90-minute listening sessions. A schedule of sessions was announced and members were asked to register for their preferred day and time. In order to maximize the probability that there would be a free and open exchange of ideas, each session was limited to 30 members. As chair of the search committee, I facilitated every session to ensure continuity and consistency. Other members of the search committee sat in and kept careful notes as to what was said.

To prevent the listening sessions from becoming rambling affairs, we used a discussion model built around the four major skills and aptitudes that one ideally hopes every pastor will have: preaching and worship leadership, pastoral care, church leadership, and community outreach. We asked members to rate the relative importance of each. Using a 10-point scale to rate a

candidate in each skill area, we asked members how they would want the points allocated if the best candidate we could find had only 30 total points spread among the four skills and attributes. This produced rich discussion and forced members to rank the skills on the basis of importance. The results of these sessions were summarized in a succinct, three-page document that proved invaluable as we set about to define the candidate we were seeking.

I am a big believer in listening sessions, but it is critical to have a skillful facilitator who is trusted by church members. Listening sessions can degenerate into complaint sessions that could possibly tie the search committee's hands if they are not conducted well.

Developing the Candidate Profile

The purpose of the Candidate Profile is to describe as clearly and succinctly as possible the candidate you are seeking. We devoted two meetings of our search committee to crafting a one-page document we entitled "Profile of our Next Pastor."

We began the development of this document by having each member of the search committee prepare his or her version of the profile. We shared these among all the members and then asked each member to individually create the best possible composite document, and all those documents were shared. Finally, we worked as a group to write our final profile.

Creating the Candidate Profile is an important step because it focuses the search committee on the kind of candidate being sought. A good Candidate Profile will help the committee avoid wasting its time in the pursuit of prospects or candidates who are not good fits. We struggled with virtually every word in our profile, but in the end, our committee unanimously embraced it as a guiding document. We will be happy to share our profile upon request.

The Church Profile

The Church Profile tells prospects and candidates about your church and your community. You should think of it as a marketing document. It might well be your best chance to persuade a prospect to become a candidate. Because it is a marketing document, it should be written positively, but without exaggeration and without glossing over special challenges that the church faces.

Our Church Profile was 29 pages in length. It included photographs of our campus and worship services, a campus layout, a brief history of the church, charts showing attendance and membership trends, financial information for four years, a directory of our ministers and staff, a description of our church governance structure, the job description for our senior pastor, the candidate profile, demographics of our membership, and information on the City of Jacksonville and the neighborhoods surrounding our church.

I appointed a two-person subcommittee of the search committee to create our Church Profile, and most of the early work on it was done outside our committee meetings. When a draft was completed, it was shared with all members of the search committee for comments and

suggestions. We then sought the assistance of the church's media and graphics coordinator to do the layout and make it look professional and attractive.

Although we created our Church Profile as a printed document (a bound booklet), we later made it available for download from our website. This allowed ministers who were curious about our position but uncertain as to whether they wanted to identify themselves as a candidate to obtain the information they needed without exposing themselves. We mailed Church Profiles to every prospect and candidate we talked with. We have no left-over print copies, but we can, upon request, provide a digital file of the main text.

The Focus List

One of the best tools we used was the Focus List. This was a list of every prospect and candidate in whom we had a strong interest, together with the key information we had been able to develop. Initially, a single page was devoted to each prospect/candidate, and it included the following information:

- The name of the prospect or candidate
- The prospect or candidate's current position
- Business address and home address
- Business telephone number and home telephone number
- Academic degrees held
- A brief career history
- Information about his or her family, including the name of the spouse and the number and ages of children
- Comments by people we spoke with who knew the prospect/candidate
- Information about the prospect or candidate's current church: the number of members, average Sunday worship attendance, the style of worship, and the size of the annual operating budget.

Initially, much of the information for each prospect/candidate came from our Advisory Cabinet. Some of the recommendations came with resumes. In other cases, we were able to develop a considerable amount of information from the Internet. As we developed additional information about a prospect or candidate, we simply added it to what we already had. Each week we distributed a new Focus List, updated with the most recent information.

We limited our Focus List to no more than 12 names at any time. There is a practical reason for this—it is very difficult to focus upon more than 12 persons. The initial group of 12 came from the 20 names suggested to us by our Advisory Cabinet. In order for a name to be placed on the Focus List, at least seven affirmative votes were required from our nine-person search committee.

At each meeting of our search committee, we reviewed the latest edition of the Focus List and considered whether any of the names should be removed based upon new information that we had developed, conversations we had directly with the prospect/candidate, or negative references. We also considered whether any additional names should be added to the list.

The Focus List quickly became our primary working document. As the search progressed, the number of pages devoted to each name grew to three or four. Six months into the search, we had narrowed our Focus List to six names.

Whenever a name was added to our Focus List, we immediately tried to develop as much background information about the prospect/candidate as possible. Once we had sufficient information to confirm our decision to add the person to the list, I called the prospect, made him/her aware of our search, and asked for permission to send a package of materials that included the Church Profile, the Profile of our Next Pastor, a job description, and a cover letter providing some background on the search itself. If the name had come to us from a member of our Advisory Cabinet, I mentioned that source during my call and in the cover letter unless our source had requested anonymity with respect to the recommendation.

No one we contacted refused the package of information. However, in a few cases, the prospect declined to become a candidate after reviewing our materials (and presumably after praying about our opportunity and discussing it with family members).

It should be apparent from our description of the Focus List that we were working with multiple prospects and candidates simultaneously. Some pastor searches follow a more serial process, focusing on only one candidate at a time. If the present candidate does not work out, the search progresses to the next one in the series. I believe this is a flawed search methodology. It is never used in the business world, and it is less likely to lead to the best possible outcome. Unless a church is very fortunate and the right candidate comes early in a serial search process, a serial process will also require more time.

Prospects versus candidates

In this document I am using these terms as follows:

- **Prospect.** A person who was recommended to us by a trusted source, in most cases by a person on our Advisory Cabinet. A prospect was not necessarily aware of our search or of our interest in him or her.
- **Candidate.** A person who either submitted an application or otherwise agreed to allow us to consider him or her for the position of senior pastor.

When I called a prospect to advise him or her of our interest, my goal was always to encourage them to become a candidate. If the person showed any signs of interest, I requested a resume (when we did not already have one) and several sermon tapes or DVDs for evaluation.

Internet research

The Internet has greatly changed the search landscape because an incredible amount of information is readily available. Many churches now have very sophisticated websites that might include downloadable video or audio of worship services, biographical sketches of staff ministers, and information about membership, worship styles, and the operating budget. Frequently there is a photograph of each staff minister and often an E-mail address.

In addition to the church sites, valuable information can also be gleaned from related sites, such as Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, Associated Baptist Press, and the Baptist Center for Ethics. It is very helpful if at least one member of the search committee has high-speed Internet access and is knowledgeable about Internet search techniques.

One-off references

As we collected resumes from our candidates, we were almost always provided with the names of references. We called these references and discussed their assessment of our candidate, but we also always requested the names of other persons who knew the candidate well. This led to what we called “one-off references,” meaning one step removed from what the candidate had provided.

In order that information collected from references is thorough and consistent, it is important to develop a questionnaire that can be used by search committee members.

Processing of inquiries and resumes

As our ads ran in the various publications over a four-week period, we began to receive a steady flow of inquiries and resumes. Within 72 hours of the receipt of any written inquiry or resume, I responded with a letter acknowledging receipt, thanking the person for his or her interest in HAB, and explaining that the resume would be reviewed and considered at the next meeting of the search committee. I believe that it is only common courtesy to respond promptly.

After a resume was reviewed and considered by the search committee, we assigned it to one of three categories: (1) a strong candidate who should be added to our Focus List; (2) possibly a viable candidate but more research is needed; and (3) definitely not a fit for our position. Of the 70 resumes generated by our advertising, not a single one was placed in the first category. About a half dozen were assigned to the second category, and each one was assigned to a member of the search committee who would conduct additional research. The vast majority were rejected, and a letter explaining that the committee had prayerfully determined the candidate was not a good fit was mailed the next day.

Only one person who came to us by way of our advertising ultimately made it onto our Focus List, and that person did not survive the process to reach the final six.

Written inquiries without a resume were also answered in a timely manner. Along with our cover letter, we enclosed a copy of our Church Profile and the Profile of our Next Pastor. In virtually every case, we heard nothing further.

Communicating with the congregation

One of the important tasks for a search committee is to regularly communicate with the congregation. At HAB, the pastor search committee is directly accountable to the congregation and not to the deacons or the Coordinating Council.

The purpose of regular communication is to assure the church that the search committee is working hard and smart, that it is doing its best to be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit, and that the search is progressing at a reasonable pace. It is also an opportunity for the search committee to request the prayers of the congregation.

We relied primarily on the *Hendricks Herald*, our church newsletter, for communication. We prepared an update from the search committee for every issue during the time of the search. Sometimes our update was very general and perhaps only a few sentences in length. But the updates served their purpose, and rarely did we ever receive any serious request from a member for more information. One member of the search committee who is a very creative and gifted writer prepared these progress updates, and I reviewed them before they were published.

In addition to the print updates, we also held quarterly forums on Sunday evenings at which I provided more detailed updates and responded to questions. Although these were lightly attended, the fact that we scheduled them defused any notions that the committee was too secretive or that it had lost touch with the congregation.

Progress reports were also made to the Coordinating Council at its monthly meetings and to the regular quarterly church conferences.

It is important that a search take place without undue interference from the congregation, no matter how well meaning that interference may be. Ironically, the best way to deflect interference is by constant communication. Generally, congregations are tempted to interject themselves into the search process only when they feel that the search process is not moving forward at a proper pace or when they feel that the search committee has lost touch with the church as a whole.

The final six

By August 15, 2005, we had narrowed our Focus List to six candidates, ranging in age from 34 to 56 and spread among six states. Each had confirmed a strong interest in our position.

At that point we were ready to begin making visits. I assigned a two-person team from our committee to visit the church of each candidate for a Sunday morning worship service. If any member had reservations about a candidate, I included that member on the visitation team under the theory that it was better to have the reservations addressed quickly than to allow them to linger into the final stages of the search.

Each team called their assigned candidate and scheduled their visit. We felt that having two persons visit, especially if they did not enter the church together, would make it less likely to attract attention. Each member of the team prepared a written summary of their visit and impressions and circulated them to the entire search committee.

Meanwhile, I scheduled day visits with each of the six candidates for the purpose of conducting in-depth conversations (some would say interviews) in order to get to know the

candidates as well as possible. The normal routine was that we would meet for breakfast, and our visit would generally extend to the noon hour. We talked about our respective churches, theology, hobbies and interest, families, what we liked to read, the kind of music we like, current events, and a host of other subjects. I was comfortable doing this because I had interviewed many candidates for high level positions in the business world. While these trips were tiring, they were also a highlight of the search process. Our final six candidates were extraordinary men, pastors, and servants of God. I delighted in getting to know them, and I learned much from my visit with each one. All six were well qualified to serve as pastor at HAB. After each interview, I wrote a five- or six-page summary of the interview and my impressions, and these were distributed to each member of the search committee.

From final four to final one

Because of the unusually active hurricane season in the fall of 2005, we did not complete our visits until late October. By the first of November, we were ready to pare our Focus List further based upon my interviews and the church visits. We unanimously agreed to remove two candidates and concentrate our efforts on the remaining four. I circulated the names and information we had on each candidate to our Advisory Cabinet and asked for feedback, both positive and negative. All four candidates were known, at least by reputation, to the majority of the Advisory Cabinet. All of the feedback was positive and encouraging.

Our next challenge was to rank our four candidates. First, we assigned each of the four candidates to a two-person team from the search committee. Each team was assigned to make a formal 15-minute presentation on behalf of its assigned candidate, putting forth the strongest case possible as to why that candidate should be our first choice. Information packages for each candidate were distributed to all members of the search committee, and these packages contained the following:

1. The section for that candidate from our Focus List
2. The candidate's resume
3. Written summaries of the reference checks that had been conducted
4. The summary of my in-depth interview with the candidate
5. The summaries of the visits by the two search committee members

We called a special meeting of the search committee in mid-November to hear the presentations. Following the four presentations, we took a brief refreshment break, and then began a series of ranking exercises using methodologies I had learned in the business world. As we began the ranking exercises, I fully believe that none of us could predict the outcome.

To our surprise, all four ranking methodologies placed one candidate—Dr. Kyle Reese—at the top. There was no consistency among the different methodologies with respect to the order in which the other candidates fell. Thus we had a clear first choice but no clear second choice. We interpreted this to be God's guidance, which we had sought continually from the beginning.

Following the meeting I called Dr. Reese to advise him of the outcome and to confirm that he was willing to proceed. The next day I had the less pleasant task of calling each of the other three candidates to inform them where we were and how we expected to proceed.

The next step of our process was to have all search committee members who had not yet attended a worship service at Dr. Reese's church schedule a visit. Again we traveled in pairs to avoid attracting attention. Our visits took place between Thanksgiving and Christmas, and each visit included a dinner with Dr. Reese and his wife on Saturday evening prior to the Sunday morning worship service.

The Candidate's visit to Jacksonville

Because of scheduling complications with the holiday season, we set the Jacksonville visit of Dr. and Mrs. Reese for late January. The purpose of that visit was to introduce the Reese's to the city, show them the church campus, allow them to meet the church staff, conduct a four-hour group interview with the full search committee, and introduce them to a select group of church leaders at a private dinner party in our home. All of this had to be done in a quiet, confidential way, as the church had not yet extended a call and Dr. Reese had not committed to come if called. Our concern was that information might leak to Dr. Reese's current church, and if that happened, it could seriously impair the relationship of trust he had with his congregation. The matter of confidentiality was strongly emphasized with everyone who met Dr. and Mrs. Reese.

The dinner party for church leaders was especially important. By this point the search committee was virtually certain that Dr. Reese was the right choice. The dinner party served two purposes. First, it provided confirmation from other key church leaders. Second, it expanded the base of support within the church when the formal recommendation was made. Persons invited to the dinner party included the chair of our diaconate, the chair of our Coordinating Council, the director of Sunday Bible study, and the chairs of all our standing committees, together with spouses. We also invited three individuals who did not hold a church office at that time but who were longstanding members of great influence.

The following week I spoke with each of the invitees to obtain their impressions of Dr. Reese. The consensus was overwhelming that he would be an outstanding choice.

Two weeks after the Reese visit to Jacksonville, the search committee met and voted unanimously to proceed toward a call of Dr. Reese. I called Dr. Reese and informed him of our vote and asked if he felt equally certain. He enthusiastically agreed to move forward, and we set the date of our formal recommendation to the congregation for Sunday, February 26, 2006.

The Call

Immediately following each worship service on Sunday, February 26, 2005, the search committee recommended to the congregation that we call Dr. Kyle Reese as our next pastor. We provided information about Dr. Reese's qualifications, but obviously we could not do

them justice in a brief five-minute presentation. We informed the congregation that a mailing would go out the following day with a full package of information on Dr. Reese and his family. We also invited members of the congregation to attend an Open Forum and luncheon following the 11 o'clock worship service on Sunday, March 5, 2005, at which the full search committee would be present and each of us would speak as to our recommendation. The Open Forum was also an opportunity for questions. Dr. Reese would then come to Jacksonville to preach in anticipation of a call on Sunday, March 12, 2005.

The Open Forum proved to be a huge success. The Fellowship Hall was packed. I presented an overview of the search process, the steps we had taken to ensure a good outcome, how we had come to be introduced to Dr. Reese, and the high quality of our four finalists (but without names). Each member of the search committee spoke about their own search journey and how they had progressed from doubt and uncertainty to a full endorsement of Dr. Reese. The spirit in the room was positive and harmonious. While there were questions, they were asked constructively and without criticism of the recommendation.

It was important for the congregation to understand how much work and careful research had gone into the recommendation of the search committee. People can sometimes make a superficial judgment about an individual based upon limited information or limited exposure. Although we had no indication of reservations within the congregation, we wanted to defuse any concerns before the vote to call Dr. Reese was taken.

On March 12, 2005, Dr. Reese preached at both Sunday morning worship services. Following each service, a vote was taken by paper ballot. Dr. Reese was called as our new senior pastor by a combined vote of 398 to one.

With the passage of almost one year since the call of Dr. Reese, I can truthfully say that I am as certain as it is humanly possible to be that God led us to this outstanding young pastor. The search was a success because we were seeking God's leadership and because we did our best to follow a process that could lead us to the pastor God had chosen.

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