

Ten Commandments for Pastor Search Committees

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You will discover that there is no ONE WAY to do pastoral search in a Baptist Church. The only thing that Search Committees have in common is taking the responsibility for what they do. It is an awesome task. But the magnitude of the task should not daunt you or keep you from moving deliberately but expeditiously. The truth of the matter is that committees and pastors both make mistakes. If you worry about the mistakes you will make, you will never make a decision. Be deliberate. Don't get paralyzed by the undertaking.

Many different models exist for doing your work. The chair of a Pastoral Search Committee in a Baptist church once said to us, "There has to be a better way of doing this than the Baptist way." He may be right! There are certainly more efficient ways. Other Christian churches, such as the Methodists, the Episcopalians, and the Roman Catholics have quicker and more efficient ways, but the congregation is not as involved as in a Baptist church with congregational church government.

The Baptist way is slower, more complicated, and filled with more problems. Democracy is always slower, more complicated and more problematic than any episcopal form of government.

So how can you do your work?

Here are **TEN COMMANDMENTS** that we think are important for a Search Committee:

1. **Farm** (as real estate salespeople "farm" for clients) for candidates; do not simply take the suggestions that randomly come your way. Before reading this, you probably have already begun **farming**. Good! Don't quit farming, yet.

Pay very close attention to the recommendations you have received. **Listen to the people you are most comfortable with and who know your kind of church.** Generally speaking, do not pay much attention to people you did not know. In finding recommendations, go after recommenders who are most like you.

Additionally, however, you **MUST** evaluate the evaluators. Review the recommenders, not simply the recommendations that they make. You should get especially interested when one of the recommenders you trust says something like: "I don't know this person well, but I have heard exceedingly good things about the person from people I respect." This is a good lead which has some neutrality in it.

2. **Résumé reading** is both an art form and a science in any field, but especially when it comes to the ministry.

A. Our experience is that résumé evaluation is more difficult for most laypeople than they imagined.

Example: What is the difference in all the degree nomenclature for ministers: What is a M.Div., Th.M., D.D., D.Min., Th.D., or Ph.D.? While not an absolute principle, beware of people waving degrees at you. It is a sure sign of ministerial insecurity when one has to flaunt the degree, such as signing a letter, “Walter B. Shurden, M.Div., Th.D”

Example: Does it make any difference what schools one attended and when they were enrolled there? You bet. While educational background is not an ABSOLUTE lead on understanding the person, it is a beginning point. For example, ministers who attended Southern Baptist seminaries prior to the fundamentalist takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention, are much more likely to be “open” than are those who have attended since.

Example: Learn to read code words and phrases. "My strength is in counseling and administration" often, but not always, means "Preaching is not my strength." "My strength is in the pulpit" may mean that "I have very little interest in administration or pastoral ministries." "I consider myself a strong leader and I believe that a church should follow the leadership of its pastor" means you are getting someone who believes in pastoral authoritarianism.

***Example:* The most important item on the résumé is the list of references. References speak volumes about the person being recommended. We recommend that the first place to look at a resume is the list of references. If you see names that you know you would not want in your church, ditch the resume. If you see names you do not know, contact someone you do know and ask about those names.**

B. You can narrow your list of candidates according to the criteria you have established. This is more difficult, however, than one imagines. A resume tells little about one's preaching. One could, for example, have written several books on preaching and **not** be a good preacher. The best index for one's preaching skills is "street talk," what others you respect are saying about that preacher's preaching ability.

3. If you find someone you like, **do not be put off by an initial negative response**. It is always easier for a pastor to stay where one is than to run the risks of moving. Committees often have to "woo" candidates, giving them a vision of the church, its challenges and possibilities.

4. **Lean on people** who know the ministerial field. A common mistake of Pastor Search Committees is in thinking that they do not need help and that they know how to do this without outside consultants. We highly recommend that you secure for your Committee some **formal paid consultants or some informal unpaid consultants**. We can provide, if you wish, names that you should check with before getting serious about any possible pastoral candidate.
5. **Describe the challenges as well as opportunities of your church.** All pastors do not respond to personal gain or larger churches. Many – and these are the ones you really want to go after – respond to the particular challenges and problems of a church. All pastors are not looking for “bigger” churches.
6. **While number “5” above is certainly true, you should offer to a prospective pastor the most attractive features possible for your church;** you may have to do this in conjunction with the Personnel Committee.

Salary matters. Don't wait till the end of the process to discuss this matter.

Sabbatical matters. Often when a church cannot pay adequately, it can offer some attractive benefits, such as a three-month sabbatical every three years, or some such.

Staff matters. Describe honestly your present ministerial staff and how the church feels about each of them. If personnel matters exist in the church that need to be addressed, address those before calling a pastor, rather than expecting the pastor to handle those issues when arriving at the church.

Provide the pastor time for doing the things in ministry the pastor really thinks is important. And the Search Committee should make the congregation aware of this BEFORE the call is issued.

Be sure you have an accurate and extensive description of your church. You may want a more limited package of materials for your "long" list and a very extensive package for your "short" list. Prospective pastors usually find the following to be helpful: (1) a history of the church, (2) budgets for the last three years, (3) several copies of weekly mail-outs and several copies of orders of worship; (4) a detailed description of "ministries" of the church; (5) some kind of description of the organization and practical functioning of the church (for example, what is the role of the Deacons and do you have a "Church Council" or other administrative body); (6) some careful description of your church's understanding of worship (traditional, contemporary, blended?); (7) a list of people who can describe the church for the candidate; (8) biographical sketches or resumes of your staff members and key lay leaders; (9) a statement about “denominational” affiliations.

7. **Use technology but do not get addicted to it.** Depend on technology in your search but know that it is not the end of all your work. Audio tapes and videos are helpful in listening to preachers, but they do not always communicate the personal dynamic. Personal presence may be far more convincing than audio tapes. The reverse is true. Likewise, a church's website should say something about the pastor's leadership in the church, but don't get turned off or turned on by either a poorly designed website or a slick one.

8. **Prepare rather than travel.** As much as possible do research and preparation before beginning to travel to hear candidates. Some committees love to travel and hear lots of preachers. We think that the far better approach, in terms of stewardship of money and time, is to **farm, evaluate resumes, talk to references, narrow list, and only then travel and interview.**

9. **Decide the procedure for your Search Committee:**

- A. What kind of vote (unanimous, 75%, etc.) must you have on the committee to “pursue” a candidate? What kind of vote must you have on the committee to recommend a candidate to the church? Increasingly we find that to ask for a unanimous agreement among Pastor Search Committee members or the church members is an unrealistic ideal. Almost no church has a UNANIMOUS agreement about the quality and effectiveness of its ministerial staff.
- B. Will the entire committee visit the prospective minister at one time or in groups? Our experience has been that committees are better off discussing and evaluating the same experience, same sermons, and same interview. In other words, the committee should visit the candidate as a whole and not in parts.
- C. Will the committee have the first interview with the candidate and spouse BEFORE you hear the candidate preach or will you wait to interview AFTER hearing the candidate preach. We believe that a helpful practice is to have dinner with the candidate and spouse on Saturday evening before visiting in church on Sunday. Of course, more interviews will be necessary.
- D. How will the committee present the candidate to the church for a vote? Will you have what is traditionally called a "trial" sermon? Will you forego the “trial” sermon and substitute a public forum for the minister to meet and be interviewed by a large group within the church?

10. **Be fair and courteous to the prospective pastors you contact** by keeping them abreast of where you are in the process. If you know that a person is not a fit for your church, write them a kind letter as soon as possible and let them know that they are no longer under consideration.

When you finish your process and you have called a pastor, write a letter to all the candidates you have contacted and all the people who have helped you with your process and let them know the name of the new pastor.