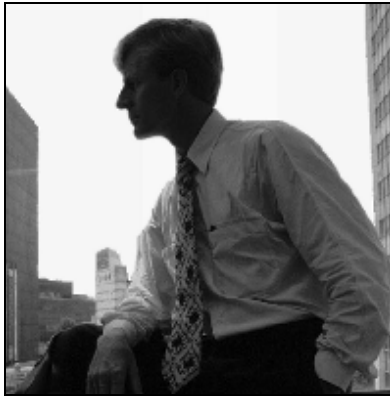


# Candidating for Your Next Position



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## 25 Questions to Ask before the Interview

*What you gotta know before meeting with a search committee.*

by Ginger E. Kolbaba

One pastor recently said, “I would rather ride a bucking bronco of a church than try to prop up a dead mule.” It’s helpful to know if you’re going to get either of those beasts before you mount up.

Just as the search committee is going to be thorough, the candidate needs to be thorough, as well. Here is a list of strategic questions to help you discern any potential problems when you’re seeking that perfect church.

**1. How would you describe your church?** Does the committee tend to define itself by its past, or is it excited about dreams for the future? Do the core values look inward or outward? Rick Ezell, pastor of Naperville (Illinois) Baptist Church, believes it’s similar to describing an individual: “I can say, ‘I’m tall, but I’d like to be taller. I’m growing, but I’m not growing like I should.’ I’m listing a lot of negative inflections.” That may point to some past conflict or a negative spirit.

**2. How was the church started?** Was the church born out of a split? “Even if it’s 100 years old,” says Leroy Armstrong, pastor of Greater Good Hope Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky, “there’s a good possibility that through the generations since the split, that spirit of fighting might still be in the church.”

**3. What is this church’s purpose?** Have they defined its mission? Does it have a well-thought-out strategy?

**4. What is your unique role in this community?** What sets this church apart from other churches in terms of character, culture, staff? What specific people groups does it reach out to, or what specific ministries does it operate that no other church in this community does?

**5. How would a neighbor around the church portray this congregation?** “When I asked this of one search committee, a couple of guys looked at me like, ‘Why would you want to know that?’” said John Beukema of Village Church in Western Springs, Illinois. “That told me a bundle about them. They were not thinking about outreach.”

**6. What is this church’s theology?** Does the church have a commitment to follow Jesus Christ as its head?

**7. How would you describe the atmosphere of worship, small-group Bible studies, board meetings, special events?** Specifically, do members of the committee agree or do they give opposite answers?



**8. What three areas must be changed in this church?** Also, what three areas definitely should *not* be changed? The answers should tell you how the church perceives its greatest needs and greatest strengths.

**9. What new ministry initiatives has the church launched in the last five years?** If none, you may encounter the we've-never-done-it-that-way-before syndrome.

**10. If you knew you couldn't fail, what would your dreams be for this church?** "Invariably the pulpit search committee is made up of influential, respected people," Leroy Armstrong says. "If they don't have any dreams, it's not likely that many in the congregation will have any."

**11. What are the statistics on church membership for the last five years?** With these you can get clues to past conflicts or splits, or if the general momentum is up or down. If membership is declining, the key question is: Why do you think this is falling? Churches that are declining or in a plateau may still be healthy. Perhaps the general population in that area is receding.

**12. Do you have a plan for growth?** How open are they to a new pastor's plan? Are you willing to pay the price of change that's going to be necessary for this church to grow?

**13. What is the single biggest obstacle to growth in this church?** John Beukema observes: "If they all agree on one single biggest obstacle, then you probably know the thing you need to tackle. If they list a bunch of obstacles, all of which may be true, then your work will be harder." Either you need align their perceptions, or the situation is complicated.

**14. What role should laypersons play in the development of a strong, growing congregation?** Everyone will affirm the role of laity, but assumptions about hospital visitation, decision making, budgeting, and vision will vary.

**15. When did your last new members join?** What would they say was the factor that attracted them to your church? If the last new members joined three years ago, there could be some stale ministries at work.

**16. Is there conflict in the church now?** How did the church resolve conflict in the past? Conflict shouldn't surprise anyone, but major conflict, especially in the last year or two will have a great bearing on the immediate ministry.

**17. What sparked your interest in me as a candidate?** Why do you think I will help this church? The answers should shed light on their expectations.

**18. What were the strengths and weaknesses of your previous pastor?** If he or she was a short-term pastor, ask about the predecessor. Do people speak of the pastor critically or appreciatively? Churches often react to the weaknesses of their previous pastor by looking for an opposite, but their expectations have probably been shaped significantly by the previous pastor.



**19. How long, on average, have previous pastors stayed?** If the church has a pattern of short pastorates, the trend will likely continue. Chris Zorn, pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Sebastian (Florida) says, "It's like a divorce. Statistics show a 60 percent divorce rate among remarriages. People get used to breaking off relationships. It becomes easier to do."

If the pastor was involved in a scandal, "I better be prepared to walk a very tight integrity rope," Armstrong says.

A related issue: If the pastor retired, will he remain a member of the church? "It's good to know that that pastor will not continue to run the church without the title," says Leroy Armstrong. "You'll put forth proposals and the people won't look to you; they'll look to the previous pastor."

**20. How does this church view its staff?** Are they viewed as professionals, as ministers who've been trained and called of God? Or are they viewed more like hired help? Are they understaffed, overstaffed, properly staffed? Are there some staff members the board wants to get rid of? Are they going to ask you to fire anyone?

In addition, what is the administrative structure of the church? To whom does the pastor answer? Who answers to the pastor? How are differences resolved?

**21. How have things been going since the pastor left?** Was there an interim pastor, or did the existing staff fill that capacity? One pastor who inherited a staff warns that when existing staff shoulder the interim responsibilities, "attachments will be made and responsibilities owned by associate staff that they may be reluctant to let go of when the new senior pastor comes in."

**22. What does the church expect of the senior pastor?** Sometimes that is assumed but not always defined in candidating situations. What are the expectations in preaching, teaching, counseling, relationship with the governing board, office hours, administration, visitation? Do staff members report to the pastor, to the board, or to the congregation? What is the relationship between staff and elected church leaders' responsibilities? In some situations it's understood that with the arrival of a new pastor, staff members tender their resignations to let him or her determine whom to keep. In other situations, nobody tenders a resignation and the pastor can't ask for it.

**23. What is expected of my family?** Do they expect my spouse to be at every church event? Has the pastor's spouse traditionally taken on certain responsibilities? If my children attend a youth group at a neighboring church, would that be a problem?

**24. Does the congregation have a policy of reviewing the pastor's salary package each year?** An adjustment, at least for cost-of-living increases, is standard.

**25. Does the call committee represent the views of church leaders?** One candidating pastor discovered that the search committee had only one member from the church council. "Each committee was operating off different pages," he said. "Only at the end of the interview process was there cross pollination of ideas or identification of issues. That became a foundation for conflict."



Once you're farther into the process, you may consider asking to see other pieces of information: newsletters, church bulletins, financial statements, meeting minutes. Newsletters will show what kinds of activities are important to them. Financial records will tell if the total church revenue has declined over the years.

Even board meeting minutes can be educational. As one pastor said, "If you see a few names constantly documented as the ones who put forth a motion, that may tell you whom you'll be dealing with as pastor." And maybe you should direct further questions to them.

*—Ginger E. Kolbaba is managing editor of MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP.*

"29 Questions to Ask the Pulpit Committee," LEADERSHIP, Summer 1998, Vol. XIX, No. 3, Page 97.



## Interviewing the Interviewers

*Making the most of candidating by taking a leadership role in the interview process.*

by Douglas G. Scott

I took a deep breath to push the fatigue from my mind and body. After traveling seven hours to be here, my wife and I were now holding cups of strong coffee, surrounded by thirty people, and trying to connect names with faces.

Members of the committee examined us closely, some smiling, some sizing us up like wary customers looking for a used car. Four months of correspondence, telephone conversations, research, and prayer had brought us to this moment. Every facet of my life would soon be explored publicly. I knew I would need the endurance of a distance runner just to withstand this evening.

The church, a major congregation in the South, was looking for a senior pastor. The search committee had sent me a bulky package of materials—results of a congregational self-study, membership statistics, a statement of mission and purpose, and comprehensive financial reports for the previous five years.

I, in turn, had provided them with my background and experience.

My wife and I had planned our three-day interview trip with surgical precision—the children were with my parents in Philadelphia, the dog housed at a kennel, the airline connections engineered so my absence would not be missed, and other clergy covering for me. The process was expensive and exhausting, but we were excited about the possibilities.

As we moved to our chairs, front and center, I prayed for discernment, knowing our conversations the next three days might well affect the rest of our lives. The chairman stood to begin the discussion.

Looking at me over the tops of his reading glasses, he said, “Before we begin, I want y’all to know I had to live up with Yankees for a year back in 1965, and I didn’t like it one bit! What makes you think you’re gonna be happy livin’ down here?”

My wife and I exchanged glances and knew at once—it was all over.

That interview at least left no doubt about the congregation’s attitudes. That’s better than a search committee and candidate performing a verbal dance trying to appear as attractive as possible in the ecclesiastical mating ritual. Often discussion is merely an exchange of theological pleasantries, with the tragic result that congregation and pastor don’t really know each other. At best, this means the first year at a new church is spent discovering the truth. At worst, such a flawed process makes everyone disillusioned since unexpected attitudes, ideas, and commitments surface only after the pastor arrives.



How can a candidate improve the situation? Can the interview itself be a constructive and even enjoyable process?

Yes. Approached carefully, the interview is an effective tool for discerning expectations. The committee may not have thought back further than the former pastor's resignation, and their forward vision may be limited to moving the new one into the manse. They may be mired in the moment, uncertain where they want to go. At your interview, you can minister to them as well as help them to discern if this invitation is of God. You can together explore their history as God's people in a particular place, helping them focus their present concerns and expanding their vision of the future.

### Reserve Time for Questions

Upon being invited to interview, one of the first things you must make clear is that you'll be asking a number of questions yourself and that you expect your questions to take at least an hour. Set the interview time accordingly.

Do not assume that people expect you to ask questions. I was once the last of six candidates to interview with a particular church, but the first to ask any questions. After our conversation, one committee member said, "We were surprised you had questions about coming here! We assumed our church was so attractive that any clergyman would be glad to come. I don't know if you are the right one for us, but you were the only candidate who forced us to think about what kind of minister our church needed."

There are three types of questions you'll want to ask:

1. *Questions of census.* These will help you discover who the congregation is. They will tell you the talents, skills, interests, and commitments these people bring to church. Questions of census also look beyond the congregation to the area it serves. Does the church draw its members from the surrounding community? Have there been major demographic shifts in the past ten years, and if so, how has the church addressed these shifts? Do these trends indicate future changes? Is housing in the area affordable for young couples? If not, what is the potential for church growth?
2. *Questions about issues.* Every congregation has issues you'll need to know about. Some are low-risk questions of theory; others are powder-kegs. Is the church inward- or outward-looking? Have changes in worship practice disrupted the congregation? Was there (or is there) any contention over the previous pastor? Have there been theological or practical divisions in the congregation? Has a building program alienated anyone?

Just as questions of census cannot be divorced from the community at large, neither can questions about issues. Has the school district been affected by busing? Is the community racially, economically, and socially integrated? If so, is the congregation? Are crime rates increasing? Candidates must explore the social context to understand issues within the church.



3. *Questions on structures.* These attempt to discover both the formal and the hidden, informal networks in the congregation. But they also can probe beyond this particular congregation. Are relations with neighboring churches friendly? Has this church been involved with ecumenical worship, educational, or fellowship programs? Are there strong ties between this congregation and the district, presbytery, or diocese? If the congregation is nonaligned, is there an active clergy association in the community for fellowship and support?

### Probe Expectations

The interview is the time for hard and honest statements. If you expect the church to increase your salary by 15 percent every year, this is the time to tell them so. If you will be disappointed by a midweek service of less than 50 percent of the congregation, explain that now!

Why? Congregational expectations of the clergy beyond the written job description (if there is one) are so erratic they are impossible to state accurately. Some parishioners will expect an eighty-hour workweek from you; others will want you to spend significant time with your family. The selection committee cannot represent all the congregational expectations, but they will probably suggest trends.

Many clergy bristle when asked if their spouse will accompany them on the interview. Terse statements are frequently made (“You are hiring me, not my wife!”), which, while true, will not endear you to the committee. Personally, I consider my wife a tremendous asset at a job interview. She has the ability to discern attitudes while I am embroiled in answering questions. In addition, she enjoys having the opportunity to meet the individuals involved—after all, she will have to live with them, too! However, many wives (or husbands) feel uncomfortable in this situation and may resent being asked. The wisest policy is to graciously tell the committee that your spouse will (or will not) be accompanying you, whichever is your preference.

### Lead with Prayer

As the interview begins, ask if you might begin with prayer if someone else has not already done so.

If you are the one to pray, let your prayer speak to the situation; don’t try to impress them with your ability at extemporaneous praying. One honest “Lord Jesus, quiet our anxious hearts” will do more for all of you than a thousand “We beseech thee of thy gracious favors.”

I believe both candidates and committee are best served if committee members ask their questions first. That way, you can modify yours to follow up on issues they have raised. Your agenda includes not only your concerns but also ministers to their needs.

Preface your questions with a statement that some answers you are looking for are matters of fact, but others are matters of feeling, specifically the committee’s feelings. As





a result, you realize there may be different answers to one question, and you welcome that diversity of opinion.

It is important to have a list of prepared questions based on your understanding of the congregation rather than appearing to ask questions off the cuff. The best kind of spontaneity, someone once said, is the well-planned kind.

While you may be tempted to deal with specific events, statistics, and services, resist the urge to focus on too narrow an area. While there are no perfect “canned” questions for each interview, I would recommend the following approach. Some questions may be useful the way they are; others will need modification depending on the situation.

The primary purpose is to allow committee members to verbalize their attitudes and expectations. You will find it far more helpful to understand their likes and dislikes than their financial condition for the last ten years.

## Questions to Ask

### **Why am I of particular interest to you?**

Start with this question. You are not fishing for compliments, but it helps to know if committee members are excited about you as their potential pastor. You also need to know why you are of real interest. The answer may surprise you!

I interviewed with one congregation who confessed (after I asked) that they weren't really interested, but the bishop had asked them to contact me and they felt obliged to do so. Once I knew that, we were able to talk in depth about their particular situation. As a result, they were able to clarify some issues in congregational life they had not seen prior to my visit.

### **What has been the most significant event in the life of this congregation since you have been a member?**

The question serves two purposes. First, you discover what events are significant to them, which helps both you and the committee focus on future expectations. In addition, you see what ministries this congregation considers significant. Do their responses focus on worship activities? Social functions? Outreach programs? Would you characterize any of those events as significant if they happened in your church?

### **Aside from looking for a new pastor, what has been the most upsetting event in the life of this church?**

Unless this congregation is highly unusual, there probably has never been a public opportunity for members to express their frustration, disappointment, and anger. While they may have had plenty of private (and potentially divisive) opportunities, your question allows them to voice pain openly. It also allows you the luxury of future vision—that is, knowing what is likely to upset them in the years ahead.

### **In your opinion, what areas of concern need to be addressed by this congregation?**



Delightfully nonspecific, this question may be the perfect invitation for a committee member to open an issue that is unresolved or unrecognized. You must, however, be prepared to bring the group back to your agenda should they spend too much time on isolated concerns.

This question once evoked a heated argument within one search committee over a question of property maintenance. When we pursued it further, I discovered that half the members expected the pastor to mow the church lawn in summer and shovel the snow in winter.

**What kinds of things did your former pastor do particularly well?**

Certain questions regarding your predecessor are fair territory as long as you refer to him with respect and treat his ministry with courtesy and honor. Your kindness in asking this question will be appreciated. It allows people to celebrate their former pastor in a specific way—by holding up his or her particular gifts in ministry. It also allows you to see what aspects of ministry were well-received, including tasks that may be expected of you.

**What were the circumstances of your former pastor's departure?**

You may already know the answer through the grapevine. But unless the former pastor died in office, it is a good idea to ask so the committee can openly state the reasons. If your predecessor died in office, or if he was extremely popular and moved on to another congregation, you will have to be sensitive to their need to mourn his departure. If you are following an individual who had a long term as pastor, you may want to ask if the committee feels another long-term pastorate is feasible considering the tenure of your predecessor.

**In what areas did you wish your former pastors had more expertise?**

"We've had three preachers in a row in this church, and now we need a money man!" Listening to this response by a committee member a few years ago, I was glad I had asked!

You have cushioned this question by making the subject plural, thus taking the onus off your predecessor, but you've still allowed them to express their opinions about unaddressed areas of need. Two caveats here: First, you are not talking about personality traits but ministerial skills. Second, ask them to speak only from first-hand experience. Rumors that Pastor So-and-so didn't deal with poor Mr. Jones's suicide very well may be nothing more than rumors, and are therefore counterproductive.

**What methods of support have you used in the past to help your pastor become a better minister?**

The question may stop them cold! If they display signs of confusion, offer explanations based on your expectations of congregational support. Did they encourage (and offer to pay for) any continuing education? Are there formal structures to assist the



pastor in preaching by providing disciplined feedback? Has the congregation developed methods to evaluate their own performance as Christian ministers?

**Tell me about the governing board.**

And I mean everything! How are members elected? Does the board rotate membership on a regular basis? What is the background, business, and interest of each member? What kind of jobs do they hold? Are they employers or employees? The answer makes a significant difference in how they treat their clergy!

Who runs the stewardship, Christian education, youth, mission, and outreach programs? Who oversees building maintenance? Is the church board bound to any state laws in addition to congregational by-laws and denominational methods of procedure? If there is a staff in addition to the pastor that is responsible for church-staff relations? How much authority does the board exercise in staff management? How frequently does the board meet? How long do most meetings last?

The church building may be beautiful, the community ideal, the parsonage a mansion, but the quality of your working life will be determined largely by your relationship with the board. Discover as much as you can about its members and how they function before you consider accepting this call.

**Has the pastor's family traditionally taken an active role in this church?**

In answering this question, committee members may reveal how they felt about the level of activity of previous pastors' families. Therein lies the key to the criteria by which your family will be judged.

**How is the pastor's compensation package determined? How frequently is it reviewed? By whom?**

Presumably, you already know what salary the church is offering. What you are interested in is whether you will be a participant in your salary review a year after your call. You also need to sensitize the committee to the increasing financial burden placed on clergy by factors beyond their control such as Social Security increases and the loss of equity by living in church-owned housing.

Far too often, humility or embarrassment prevents clergy from honestly discussing financial needs, but the laborer is worthy of his hire, and your compensation package must meet the needs of your family. Your interest in the process and participation in annual reviews must be stated at the outset.

**How should your pastor spend his time? In the course of a week, how much time should be spent in prayer, sermon preparation, administration, visiting?**

At some point, get specific information about people's expectations of your time. I remember asking a question about the rector's personal time, and a vestryman responded, "Day off? Why, our rectors never take a day off!" I accepted the call to that church and found the man wasn't kidding—the congregation expected their rector to be



available at a moment's notice. It took two years before they became accustomed to my practice of leaving town a day and a half each week.

**How many hours do they expect you to work in a week?**

If you expect to work forty hours, and others expect eighty, better to know it now! How are those hours to be used? When they are used up and work remains undone, what happens? If you work extra hours one week, will they allow you to take those hours for yourself and your family next week? Do they see prayer, study, and sermon preparation as part of your workweek or things to be done on top of forty hours of hospital and home visiting?

In your questioning, you must not sound judgmental—you are acquiring information. Committee members may have thought of the pastor's job only in the most general terms. These questions force them to state their expectations clearly both for themselves and the candidate.

**What organizations in the congregation are the most active or successful?**

This allows you to determine congregational priorities. If the Ladies' Bridge Club is thriving but the Young People's Fellowship is limping along, you know where the commitment is. Ask if any organizations have dissolved in the last two years. If so, why?

**Beyond calling a pastor, what is the highest congregational priority for the next twelve months?**

Whatever the responses (and there are bound to be more than one), they will form your expected agenda for the next year. You must determine if their interests align with your own. You may want to build a men's program or start an emergency food cupboard, but they may want to panel the church lounge or pave the parking lot.

**What goals have you established for church growth? What methods can be used to achieve those goals?**

The question of growth is a census question. Where will the new people come from? If this community is like most others, the question will be how to attract and sustain the unchurched. Is the church ready for that?

Perhaps the most honest response I ever received to this question came from one committee member who said, "Getting more people is your job, and I don't care how you do it. I just come here to worship."

While undoubtedly many people feel this way, if that attitude is embraced by the congregation as a whole, the task before you is formidable.

**What plans have you made for the expansion of staff or facilities?**

If they haven't planned for expansion, they don't intend to grow. The vision of their future ministry is bound by the limitations of the present moment. While this may not deter you from accepting the position, you must realize you have some hard work cut out for you, beginning with an expansion of their horizons.



**How stable is this congregation financially?**

With the recent economic uncertainties, few churches have been able to work toward future financial security. Ask them to speculate aloud about the future financial needs of the congregation.

**What programs have you planned to implement in the next ten years?**

Many churches feel any plans they may have had go out the window when a new pastor comes. On the other hand, some congregations may be anxious to implement changes the former pastor disallowed. The question allows them to state their dreams of the future. You, in turn, can give them an honest assessment of your interest in those particular programs with relatively little risk.

*—Douglas G. Scott was rector of The Church of St. Thomas of Canterbury in Smithtown, New York, at the time of this writing.*

"Getting the Real Story: A Guide to Candidating," LEADERSHIP, Summer 1984, Vol. V. No. 3, Page 24



## Is This the Church for Me?

*Questioning yourself is a crucial part of the call.*

No church can ever fully meet a minister's needs, any more than one minister can fulfill all the expectations of a congregation. Even so, you need not accept any offer that comes along. How do you know when to pursue an interview to the next stage or to accept the call if offered?

Accepting a call is at best a series of tradeoffs. Are you are willing to live with this particular drawback in order to acquire that specific benefit?

Before you begin the process, take time to assess your professional needs and your family's social and economic needs. What are the nonnegotiables? What are things you'd be willing to wait two years for? What are mere preferences?

Do you have skills as a teacher that you need to use? Are you particularly gifted in youth work? Do you hunger to share your spiritual journey with a group of fellow pilgrims? What family needs will shape your decision? Will your spouse expect or need to work? What stages have your children reached in their schooling? Will their gifts or needs require specialized instruction or guidance?

Don't forget to list areas where you will require assistance. Do you find administrative work a burden and hope to have members of the congregation share the load? Do you depend on lay assistance in visitation? Do you need structured feedback to help you gauge your performance?

An honest assessment of needs will highlight specific areas your interview must address. If your needs assessment is carefully done, you'll know what you require and what you're willing to trade off.

The criteria you establish, however, may not be your final basis for deciding. I once interviewed with a church that presented me with a dozen reasons to say no. Some members of the search committee were guarded, others hostile. Several questions I asked received an answer I didn't expect (or want). Accepting the call would have meant taking a cut in salary and moving my wife and children even farther from our already distant families. I was certain the pastor who accepted this call would be faced with a long list of difficulties.

But I accepted that call nonetheless and serve that congregation today, convinced that even though it seemed all wrong, it was definitely right.

The interview, stressful and upsetting as it may be, is the best forum for hammering out concerns, commitments, and priorities in an atmosphere of intense excitement and high expectation. Handled carefully and prayerfully, it can be a time of joyous discovery that leads to a long and fruitful relationship.

—Douglas G. Scott



## **Courting a Church**

*What to check out before saying "I do" to a calling church.*

by Kenneth Quick

One cynic declared, "All pastoral search committees lie." I prefer to think a search committee puts makeup on the church to present it as attractively as possible to pastoral beaux. That's the nature of courtship, but it causes some surprise when you see her that first morning without her face on.

While none of us can learn everything about a church's history or avoid every surprise in a new ministry, we can minimize the surprises by asking some key questions before we say "I do" to a call. The relationship of pastor and church needs to be built on the solid reality of what both the church and pastor are getting, as well as on the call of God.

### **Questions for Early Courtship**

One of the initial questions I've asked a search committee is: "How familiar are you with my resume?" I've found I may need to review specific items in my resume.

I learned this the hard way once, several stages into the interview process. Members of the search committee knew much about me by this point. My wife and I were convinced this was the church, for everything seemed so right. I flew in on a Monday to interview and see the church. Wednesday I was to fly home so I could return on Friday with my wife and preach Sunday for a call.

During the final interview, the committee returned to an item on my resume about my wife's pursuit of a master's degree in business administration. "This is unsuitable for a pastor's wife," they informed me. "We'd want you to ask her to find her fulfillment in the church."

Horror stricken, I asked why they had waited so long to bring up something so clear in my resume. "Oh, we hadn't noticed it," they replied. I made sure every other search committee did.

Second, I ask, "What in my resume sparked your interest in me?" This spotlights those particular aspects of my ministry they think can help them. Knowing these hot spots, I can balance this information with what I'm looking for in a call.

Another question helpful in discerning the nature of the potential marriage partner is "If your church were a woman, what would she be like?" This often draws blank stares, so I elaborate: "How old would she be? What kind of car would she drive? What would she do for a living? Is she outgoing or reserved? What is she concerned about most in life?" A good follow-up is "What if your church were a man? Describe him to me."



The committee typically struggles with this offbeat question, so I clarify my intent by explaining that every church has a personality reflected in the kind of people who attend and the atmosphere of the services. I want them to identify the corporate characteristics of their church.

I asked this of the staff of my present church, and later of the small-group leaders. Their answers coincided. I learned that my church is a 35-year-old, slightly balding accountant who has two children and drives a station wagon. He dresses conservatively and is cautious but open about change. He is cerebral, moved more by information than emotion. He is friendly to those with whom he wants to be friendly but can appear standoffish. He is a spectator in sports, not a participant. He has no hobbies because he is too busy. He feels frustration and guilt over what he fails to accomplish.

This picture gave me much to work with in contemplating my potential ministry among these people. I could ask: Is my personality compatible with that kind of person? Can I live with the kind of leadership style necessary to guide such a person? Do I influence more by emotion or by information? Having been in my present church two years, I can affirm the accurate analysis I received from this question.

Candidates who haven't yet been burned might not understand the importance of asking, "How much debt is the church carrying, and what is the present state of the budget?" Let me assure you, it's critical information since many surprises come in the area of finances. The pressure of debt can make boards, treasurers, and ultimately pastors act rashly. Often an unspoken expectation says a new pastor will bring in new revenue in some mystical way. We're wise to gain some idea of the nature of this pressure beforehand.

## **Questions about Previous Husbands**

One of the most fruitful areas to explore is the committee's thoughts about their previous pastors. Many search committees react to the previous administration, thinking they want to swing the ministry in a new direction. If the former pastor was weak in the pulpit but strong in administration, the committee often looks for a powerful preacher whose administrative skills need not be so virile.

The importance of asking questions about the previous minister increases in proportion to the problems the church had with him. Therefore, I ask the committee and others from the church, "Would you describe for me the strengths and weaknesses of the previous pastor and his ministry?"

It's not uncommon to have to sort through some extreme answers on both ends of the scale. But if most answers fall far toward the positive or the negative, it sends up a red flag worth investigating. Either situation presents major difficulties for an incoming minister.

Negative responses invite investigation. I'm not interested in digging up dirt; I'm checking out why the pastor and church had such a hard time getting along. Since I'm





thinking about marrying the same spouse, I want to know if she is bringing unresolved problems into our relationship.

In candidating for my first pastorate, I learned the previous pastor had been fired. The board had told him after a morning service that they didn't want him back in the church, period. I discovered the previous pastor's style had been authoritarian and abrasive. The Sunday he had been fired, he was preaching on how that church was a disgrace to the community.

Knowing I had a different style of leadership, I didn't anticipate the same problems. Ten fruitful years in that ministry justified my conclusions.

In contrast, a friend was called to a beautiful church with some wonderful people but perennial problems. My friend failed to ask about attitudes toward the previous administrations, and I watched that church tear up him and his family, just as it had the others.

I also see a caution flag when I hear overwhelmingly positive comments about a previous minister. If a church remains enamored with the previous husband, ministry is difficult to impossible. Working in someone's large shadow invites continual negative comparisons and congregational dissatisfaction.

One pastor who followed a man who had retired after forty years of prominent ministry at the church told me during his first stormy year there, "You know, I feel I'm the sacrificial lamb for this church. They need me in order to get over Pastor." He left during the second year.

Though such a church may appear to offer a solid, stable marriage, it may need time without a pastor to prepare it to open its arms to a new spouse without making unhealthy comparisons.

## **Questions for Previous Husbands**

When I'm getting serious about a new church, one of my first requests is how I can reach the previous pastor, or, as with one church that had gone through several pastors in rapid succession, two or three previous pastors. I should never be so naive as to think my experience will be different.

I've gained a wealth of information by questioning these former husbands who have given a portion of their lives to that spouse. Whether positive or negative, their perspectives on the ministry match no other. I ask, "What kind of problems did you encounter? What did you seek to do and why? Why did you leave? What kind of pastor do you feel the church needs now, and why?" I conclude with my most important question: "If I were to take this church, what three pieces of advice would you offer?"

When I asked the former pastor of my present church this last question, he said, "First, don't promise anything silly, such as visiting everyone the first year." He knew the time it takes to get around Toronto. Visiting the congregation would have left me with



little time for anything else. “One hospital call can take all afternoon,” he told me, helping me budget my time more effectively from the beginning.

“Second, don’t be afraid to trust your board members,” he said. “I probably should have entrusted to them more of the ministry than I did.” He’d hit one of the few criticisms I’d heard about his ministry. I could learn much from that.

“Third, don’t even rearrange the flowers on the platform the first year. As an American, you may not know that Canadians are suspicious of rapid change. Let them get to know you and trust you first, and then they’ll be willing to listen and take direction from you. There is tremendous potential, but you can destroy it by moving too fast.”

His perspective on the ministry was invaluable, and I followed it. He has since become a good friend. It’s healthy for the congregation to see that I respect and care about the man who previously embraced them.

## Check Out Church References

Most efficient search committees check a candidate’s references, realizing a sharp resume and personal charm may cover flaws known only after long association. The candidate expects this. But a candidate who wants to minimize surprises also asks the church for references.

In the final stages of courtship, a pastor can ask for a list of addresses and phone numbers of several people knowledgeable about the church. These people can be contacted to obtain basic information about the church, its history, its reputation, and what they feel about the church. Also, why not pose the question I ask the former pastor: “What three pieces of advice would you give me if I were to become the pastor of this church?”

This is one of those “if I had it to do over again” lessons for me. I didn’t seek such information from churches I’ve pastored, but it would have helped immeasurably to have called the following:

1. *A neighbor near the church who does not attend*, whether a Christian or not. The aim here is to find out the church’s reputation in the community. This can help pastors know what they’re up against. It also makes a positive contact in the neighborhood. Most neighbors would be glad that a new pastor cares what they think.

The family that lived next to my first church had received little attention from the church, though the family had lived there eight years. “Your people keep pretty much to themselves,” the man told me one day, confirming my frustration over some family cliques within the church. Even as the pastor, I had had trouble breaking into family circles. The neighbor felt that, too.

The family across the street could have told a story, too. They had attended the church for years but had left over trouble with the first pastor. That would have been helpful information for me.



2. *A nearby minister within the same denomination.* Other pastors are often aware of the problems in sister churches, either through picking up stray sheep or through fellowship with the former minister. In addition, such contact gives the candidate a feel for the church's reputation within the local district of the denomination.

My eyes were opened to a major problem in my first ministry by talking to the pastor of a sister church. I was amazed to find out how much he knew. He clued me in on several families with problems.

Garrison Keillor, in his Lake Wobegon monologues, describes how members of one congregation often will go to the minister of another congregation for a "second opinion." This neighboring pastor undoubtedly was the second opinion for some of my members struggling to digest the counsel of previous pastors.

This pastor also told me, "Ken, do you know your church's sport teams have a terrible reputation?" No, I didn't. I hadn't actually centered on church sports in the candidating process. But I've since learned that teams reflect the spiritual maturity of the men and women in the church. That unpleasant surprise could have been anticipated had I phoned this pastor while I was candidating.

3. *Two individuals who have left the church recently*, one happy with the ministry and one unhappy. For my first hospital call in ministry, I visited an irascible woman in the hospital for gallbladder surgery. She hadn't attended the church for two years, due to a falling out with the previous pastor, but her relatives alerted me to her need.

She gave me an earful on subjects the search committee had never broached. Some of what she said certainly was jaundiced ("Every pastor they've had was weird"), but other stories alerted me to areas of corporate sensitivity, which I later would discover were on target.

While candidating for my present ministry, I had the opportunity to talk to people who had left the church to plant a daughter church. They told me their views of the mother congregation, both positive and negative—its helpfulness, its vision (or lack of it), its ministry orientation. That valuable information helped me see I had something to contribute to that church, even though it was different from what I gave to my first church.

## **A Conference with God**

I have to realize that people to whom I talk may have axes to grind. No one piece of information ought to scare me away without careful crosschecking. And no church is perfect, just as no candidate is. But all this research helps me define the task before me, outline its boundaries in comparison to my abilities, and eliminate unpleasant surprises.



I need most of all to bring this information before God and talk it over with him. I'll not anticipate everything, but I know the one who holds all knowledge, and he has some opinions about my candidacy.

*—Kenneth Quick was pastor of Parkway Bible Church in Scarborough, Ontario, at the time of this writing.*

"Candid Candidating," LEADERSHIP, Fall 1990, Vol. XI, No. 4, Page 70.



## Ramping up the Search Committee

*It's time to professionalize the hunt for a pastor.*

by Mark Lauterbach

I shall always prize a man from a church in southern Illinois. He was the chairman of a pastor search committee, and he came to visit with me prior to arranging an interview for the whole committee. He attended our church in a major metropolitan area and had lunch in our home in a large suburb. At the end of the weekend, he asked, "How long do you think you could live in a community of 5,000 people?" We ended the process there.

What I appreciated about this man is what I would like to see more often in the search process: he knew his church and his community, he took time to learn about me, and he did it in person.

Sounds simple enough, doesn't it? Then why do so many search committees approach the task like a posse rounding up a train robber? These deputized amateurs mean well, but they often show the finesse of Gabby Hayes. Their work should be stealth-like, but everybody in town knows what they're doing. There's no way seven strangers can sneak into a worship service unnoticed. And sometimes, their operation ends with a lynching.

After 25 years as a pastor with experience on both sides of the search process, I have a few recommendations.

### Find Out How It's Done

Your goal is to find a godly pastor of proven character with leadership gifts and skills to accomplish God's plans for your church. No matter how thorough your search, you could end with a mismatch. But with much prayer and some sensible guidelines, you may locate a leader who is well-suited for your church for this time.

That process begins with honest assessment. Search committees are convened infrequently (we hope) and usually don't include people with past experience. Most members are not skilled in hiring, yet they must serve as human resources directors. They are not theologians, but they are expected to ask theological questions. They do not run a church, but they have to evaluate someone for their ability to do so. Truth be told, they usually operate on the basis of what they like and do not like.

That being the case, it would seem best to get good counsel from more than one source on how to proceed. Denominational leaders can be helpful. Pastors of other churches make good coaches, too.



## DNA Test Your Church

The first thing many churches do when the pastor leaves is to take a survey to assess what they need in a pastor. Before doing that, the committee must understand that every church has a distinct culture. So they should take some culture samples.

Use surveys cautiously. They are valuable if the leaders of the church guess at the results first, then compare those with the actual findings. This shows how well you know the church. They are valuable if an outside leader or consultant helps you know what to look for.

One church took a survey, which revealed that the congregation lived in its past. Every area of perceived strength was from their golden days, and those were long over.

How do you know who you are? It's not easy. We tend to talk a good show. My key is that actions reveal reality, not words. Forget the mission statement; it's a dream. What people have *done* recently shows what they think is important.

It's important to involve new people. They often see you more clearly than you see yourself. Above all, get face-to-face, form home meetings, be personal.

Here are a few simple questions to get at actions:

1. *What are the most popular programs of the church?* Don't tell a prospective pastor you are a praying church when no one comes to pray, no one stops to pray with another, and there is minimal prayer in Sunday school.
2. *What do members of the church get upset about?* People argue about things that violate their DNA, even if it's convenient parking. Along this line, what was the last argument about at the board meeting?
3. *What happened to the last person who changed the program—sang different songs, modified the schedule?* Was it easy to make the change? Did people get angry? This shows if you are open to change.
4. *What have been the longest-term successes of the church?* These are your potential idols.
5. *What has been the length of tenure of pastors?* Of staff members? Have you had more than a few angry departures?

In addition, ask members to describe what the people of the church do with their time. Describe what the budget is spent on. If the members hang out with each other and spend all their spare time in the church, then don't talk about its concern for evangelism.

The church's DNA most likely comes either from a long-term pastorate or from a highly negative or positive experience.

I was close to accepting an invitation to candidate at another church. A good friend, who had attended the church while in graduate school, knew the church well. It was a wonderful group of people, she said, with over sixty years of admirable history.



Nevertheless, no pastor had ever served more than seven years, and most terms were much shorter, she said.

I asked the search committee about this history, which they dismissed as irrelevant. This was a matter of not having the right pastor, they said. They wanted a long-term minister but never found the man who fit. I doubt it. That behavior pattern is usually an indicator of the church's DNA.

After you have checked the DNA, determine what the church needs in a leader. Cynical friends of mine say churches always pick someone who is the opposite of their previous pastor. Great doers follow great teachers and great teachers follow great doers.

The exiting pastor can offer insight. One pastor told his board that there were a few qualities he had built into the church that they should not change. They ignored him, brought in a total contrast, and took the church through years of pain and conflict.

### **Sometimes You Speed Up**

Someone has convinced search committees that the only way to get a full pool of names is to solicit resumes from every pastor in North America. Now Internet accessibility has made this solicitation simpler—and complicated the whole process. One church I know received 500 resumes.

There is a better way.

Take time to talk to people who know pastors. Contact folks who both know your church and know candidates who are worth pursuing. If you do not know people who can make those recommendations, start with seminary presidents or professors, or pastors of churches nearby.

Get their top recommendations and make them your short list. One church I know looked at only ten possible candidates. No need to purchase a new file cabinet to house all the resumes.

One church told me, "You are one of four we are interviewing. We will complete our process in six weeks and let you know where you stand." And they called me on time!

On the receiving end, I can tell you it is wonderful to get a personal letter soliciting your resume. "We received your name from Dr. X and he recommended you highly. Are you interested?" Boy was I interested!

Since the Internet Age has arrived, use it to get names. Then stop using it. Make your contacts with candidates personal and speedy.

Here is a true story: A church advertised its opening through an Internet posting. Interested prospects were advised to send in resumes via e-mail attachment. The search committee then directed prospects to a website for "all their questions to be answered" and to complete an online questionnaire. In addition, candidates were asked to mail in sermon tapes. Two months later, there was a phone call—not to get acquainted, but just three minutes to ask permission to contact references.



A month after that an e-mail arrived, noting that the committee had appreciated getting to know the pastor but they would be choosing someone else.

May I say it directly? Make your communication personal. Get voice to voice as soon as possible. Good communication requires it. And resumes can't tell the whole story. I have seen many search committees make an entirely wrong assessment of a resume. Get the person on the phone before making conclusions about "no go" signals such as age, education, doctrinal convictions. When I look for staff, after a preliminary assessment of the resume and a recommendation or two, I make a call. Personal is good.

Next, meet face to face as soon as you think the person is a good possibility. One church sent me one letter, telling me I had been recommended. They asked me to respond to one question if I was interested. I responded. They called two weeks later and apologized for taking so long! I can still hear that conversation, "Mark, we think you are one of our top possibilities. We do not like to spend much time with mail and phone calls. Would you come out for a visit, at our expense, no strings attached?" Wow, this committee knew how to communicate!

When I visited, I had time with every member of the committee individually and with the whole group. I met with staff members in a discrete way. They put me in a nice motel. They rented me a car. They gave me a clear schedule. I had a number to call if I needed to reach them.

I ended up being their candidate and the process continued with this level of professional and personal care. They even put flowers in our room when my wife and I arrived for the interview!

## **Dying in the Process**

Timing is an issue. A bureaucratic process can mean losing an opportunity. If a candidate rises to the surface, follow up now, even if it violates your methodical plan of attack.

One search process I shared in brought to us a man recommended by two-thirds of our sources. We debated whether to scuttle our multi-step process and go for him. We did, and we were glad we did. He was being interviewed by others. His hope was to work with us, but he was going to take what came first.

When you have a short list, don't keep the candidates waiting.

## **Answer the Tough Questions**

Whether your church addresses its problems during the interim or saves them for the new pastor, be prepared to 'fess up to them. Tell candidates the truth about who you are.

Every church has a history. Every church has limits to what it will change. Instead of saying, "We are looking for a new leader to take us into the future," how about this: "We are an established church that is fairly committed to a formal pattern of worship and





adult Sunday school. We may get used to drums, but forget the rock and roll. And our idea of good worship is where people use their hands to hold their hymnal.”

That I can buy.

Tell me the building needs repair or remodeling. Tell me the parsonage has an outhouse. Don't cover your warts. I am far more attracted to humility and honesty than to a place dressed to kill. And don't go on too long about your potential. Every church has potential, which really means “the things we should be doing but aren't, and we hope a new pastor will get us to do what we've haven't wanted to do so far.” Potential is rubbish. If it is real opportunity, why isn't someone doing something about it already?

Here is an inside secret for a search committee. Those of us who are experienced are looking for a church that has the right answers to these questions:

- *Do you have any problems?* If you tell me, “We all have problems,” I am heading to the airport fast. Tell me, “Yes, we had a staff member who we hurt deeply by treating him poorly” or “We have a changing population in the neighborhood.” These I will buy.
- *How long have you had these problems?* Not long, I hope, or you don't have a problem; you have a dysfunctional church.
- *What have you done to fix them?* Don't say, “Well, it's all in the past now, we are moving on.” I want to know what you did to make it right.

## **First You Hold Hands**

Here's one more place to slow the process, just a bit. If possible, make the candidating with the congregation a two-Sunday process. I have done this at two churches. It was invaluable. I came, I preached. I spent the week with members and committees in many settings. When I preached the next week, these were now people I knew.

The goal was as much time with as many different people as possible. This is courtship—what's the rush? I can say that reality begins to come through about Friday of the week. Questions emerge repeatedly. You sense attitudes. You get to see the candidate under pressure, and he gets to see you in your own living room. This makes for a good decision.

*—Mark Lauterbach was a church planter with Sovereign Grace ministries in Washington, D.C., at the time of this writing.*

“Rescuing the Search,” LEADERSHIP, Fall 2003, Vol. XXIV, No. 4, Page 44



## A Spouse's Plea to the Search Committee

How can you make this process more humane?

*My husband has served three churches during his 13 years in pastoral ministry. We've had the opportunity to interact with many search committees, which is an exasperating experience at times. As a pastor's family, we will never be on a pastoral search committee or be able to directly influence the process. This letter, then, is my attempt to make candidating more humane.*

### 1. Simplify the first round of questioning.

Many search committees use lengthy questionnaires to make their preliminary cut of candidates. Some have required more than 50 pages!

Please consider using a short questionnaire with broad questions like "Are there any areas of our church's statement of faith that you disagree with?" instead of long lists of issues such as "What are your views on women's roles? ... on music? ... on abortion?"

More detail may be appropriate after you have narrowed the candidate list.

### 2. You want timely responses of us. Please return the favor.

We have often waited months between phases of a committee's search before hearing any response from them. We totally understand that search committees are not doing this full-time and that they have jobs and families, but please appoint a correspondence secretary to keep those on your list up to date.

### 3. Tell us about your church.

You ask for tons of information from prospective candidates. Please provide information to us about your church and your community.

In the search process, it's routine for strangers to ask my husband personal details about his life and ministry. He is often required to name friends and references without knowing a thing about the church making the contact. So please include at least a one-page sheet about your church (leadership style, worship style, size) and your community (demographics, economy, schools). We would like information to prayerfully consider whether to apply or to avoid wasting your time.

### 4. Reject others as you would have them reject you.

When communicating rejection to a pastor, would you be so kind as to say something positive before you say, "After much prayer, we have decided that you are not a good fit for us"? It is incredibly disheartening, after spending hours on a questionnaire, to receive a terse, impersonal rejection letter.

My husband remembers one rejection letter that actually made him feel good. The committee commented on his strengths and gifts even though he was not the right match for them. It was not a form letter, and he benefited from the thought that went into it.

We will appreciate whatever you can do to make the search more productive and positive for everyone involved. May God bless you in your search.

—A pastor's wife from California

"An Open Letter to the Search Committee," LEADERSHIP, Fall 2003, Vol. XXIV, No. 4, Page 44



## Jilted Again

*Candidating means you gotta know how to handle rejection.*

by Bob Myers

I've been here before and I don't like it. Rejection hurts. Recently, I spent three months interviewing for a position—three months of answering philosophical questions, submitting videos and recordings, meeting on conference calls, and finally making an on-site visit. When things didn't work out, I felt like the groom in a Julia Roberts movie. Once more I was left at the altar.

I needed a recovery plan.

My first reaction was to rant. Twenty years ago my wife would have told me to go into computers, but now even that option doesn't look so good. She held her tongue and listened. God bless her.

Next I went to a quiet place. I'm a worship pastor, so I turned to worship.

Worship is the first step in positively dealing with pain. Job did it right when he lost everything. "Job tore his robe and shaved his head." (Is that an ancient form of pity-rant?) "Then he fell to the ground in worship" (Job 1:20). Of course, Job voiced his complaint to God later in the story. But that's part of worship, too. Worship is more than just praise, thanksgiving, and adoration. Worship is engaging God with an honest heart.

The Psalms are full of lament and complaint. "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart?" (Ps. 13).

Worship with the Word and an honest heart brings perspective. It reminds us who we are and affirms His lordship over our life. The psalms of lament end with statements of praise and trust in God. Worship births hope for the future.

For me, a vision for life without my dream ministry began to emerge. With some perspective and some hope, here are some intentional steps I took.

**1. Ask what went wrong.** It's humbling and may hurt a bit, but I needed to know why the church did not choose me. I learned I did not present myself well. In hindsight, I was too laid-back and overconfident.

Find out where you were perceived to be weak and make a plan to fix it. It is information that you will need if you plan to seek another position in the future. The person who dialogued with you the most in the interview process will have a good read on what went awry.

**2. Confer with people who know you well.** After you've been wounded, you need affirmation. Look for people who will be honest with you and who also understand



your deepest yearnings. I'm a musician and the source of my frustration comes from my aesthetic needs and desires. Fortunately I have a few mature friends who understand that. They heard me, encouraged me in my dreams, and reminded me that eternal values transcend personal longings for achievement.

**3. Re-evaluate your current situation.** I realized I'm dealing with only one major frustration. It's a great church and I have wonderful people that I answer to. I'm blessed in my current position. I'm formulating a plan to help me deal with the frustration.

I'm also beginning to understand God's grace in keeping me in my current position. Moving would have been a hardship on my family. In addition, I have just started a doctoral program. Stepping into a larger ministry would have made it more difficult to devote myself to studies.

On the other hand, I've been in settings where I knew I had to leave. In one situation, I searched more than a year and came up short in the final stages two times. After the second rejection, I was emotionally drained. I resigned to become a public school teacher. God gave me two of the worst classes that I ever heard of. It reconfirmed my call to ministry!

I still have my moments of discouragement, but I know God will lead me where he wants me in his time.

*—Bob Myers of Sioux City, Iowa*

"Jilted Again," Leadership, Fall 2003, Volume XXIV, No. 4, pg 47.