

7 INAPPROPRIATE ADVISORS/GATEKEEPERS.

Committees will often assign only one person (sometimes the church secretary) to become their interface with referring agencies and prospective employees. If that person represents the committee's intentions and best interests, that can be fine. If not, watch out! I have seen individuals wield too much power because the wrong person was assigned or volunteered to do certain tasks. Their own personal agenda and tastes then dominated the process. A committee will profit if the entire committee is fully involved with important and interactive assignments rather than having just one or two people do most of the work. Checking references is one good opportunity for the entire committee to participate significantly.

8 TALKING TOO MUCH. Confidentiality is crucial, an absolute. What happens in the committee process needs to stay in the committee. Get the information you need from the congregation early in the process. Ask them to pray for you. It is indicative of an anxious, impatient and untrusting church if they do not respect the committee they have elected. Never should the congregation find itself lining up behind different candidates, which will only assure an unhappy contingent when the selection is made. (On the other hand, a church has a right to receive good communication from the committee. You can and should give regular reports on process and progress.)

Hebrews 12: 15:

"See to it that no
one fails to obtain
the grace of God."

9 DISHONESTY. In trying to put on the "best face" of the congregation, some search committees over-promise and over-promote their church. They create expectations of ecclesiastical nirvana that they cannot fulfill. They hide staff problems that led to the vacancy they now have. Tell the truth. "We will work it out when you get here," is not an honest attitude if there is no plan in place to deal with the concern. If the church neighborhood is in transition, the prospective minister has a right to know.

10 UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS. You may have a job description, but what are the unexpressed realities? Do you expect this person to work 24/7? Do you expect your small congregation to compete with the local megachurch? Do you expect to grow a 21st century church using 20th century methods? You and the minister you call will be happier if you agree on reasonable possibilities for your future together.

Lamentations 3:22-24: "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is thy faithfulness. The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him."

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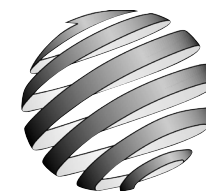


Matthew 7: 12: "In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets."

10 MISTAKES

Church Search Committees

Make WAAAAAY too often



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1 LACK OF SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT. Many laity who find themselves on a church staff search committee treat the process as if they were hiring a ditch-digger. Just hunt for someone with the right credentials at the right salary and make the job offer. Sounds simple. But, there is a spiritual dimension to the process which you ignore at your own peril. This task is about your church's spiritual welfare, as well as someone's vocation, and you will all be better off if God is involved! Pray. Fred Andrea, pastor of First Baptist Church in Aiken, SC, says "Prayer should infuse the entire process." Be discerning. (On the other hand, unfortunately, some people attempt to manipulate the committee or church with pious language: "God told me in a dream last night that this is God's person for our church." Beware!)

2 IMPATIENCE. Some people on search committees think that being without a pastor or a youth minister for two years is a threat to the vitality of a congregation. Being in a hurry and bringing the wrong pastor or youth minister to your church will be much more devastating. Take the time you need. Be deliberate as you prayerfully seek the right person to work within your church. The interim is the time to do whatever "housekeeping" needs to be done in terms of congregational decisions. Problems need to be corrected before a new minister is called. Some churches hope that time will heal their wounds, but by itself, time will not fix a congregation's problems. Time, all by itself, does not grow a very fruitful garden. Congregations remember when a growing community and a church-friendly culture and a good preacher could grow a church. Those days are gone. Wishing that a great minister will return the calendar to 1965 will not make it so. Which leads to...

3 NAÏVETÉ AND PRIDE. Women and men who are knowledgeable in their own professions mistakenly assume that because they have been in a church for decades, they have expertise in this once-in-a-lifetime experience. They are

wrong! Example #1: It is naïve to think that your new pastor will preach like Billy Graham 52 weeks a year! Example #2: Why would a layperson have reason to know which seminaries are diploma mills? Most churches need help from an outside consultant to negotiate the tricky landscape of reading a resume when finding a pastor or staff member. Ministers are, after all, trying to put their best foot forward, and a committee needs to be alert to clues that will indicate actual assets and deficits. They will not be obvious to everyone. According to Macon Sheppard, a layman at Providence Baptist in Charleston, SC, "The churches that need help the most are the ones who think they don't need help." Seek advice from people who work with Reference and Referral daily. Incidentally, one piece of advice that is commonly given by experts is that committees should resist turning the search into a "beauty pageant" in which the prospects find themselves crassly competing against one another. Some clueless churches and desperate-to-move pastors will actually consent to a "preach off" of sorts in which the prospects are brought in to strut and preach before the congregation, one per Sunday. That is a bad idea! One other common request from those who are involved in the process is that committees contact applicants (especially those with whom they have been in contact, for example, to request video or audio tapes) to let them know when their name has been eliminated, and that candidates let congregations know when they withdraw from consideration.

4 REACTING TO THE LAST MINISTER. A common error by search committees is to find someone who is the polar opposite of their last pastor or staff member. If the last pastor was young and impetuous, they look this time for an old wise soul. Or, vice versa. If their last pastor was a good pastor but a poor preacher, then they may look

Philippians 1:6: "I am confident of this: the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ."

for a great preacher this time. Or, vice versa. What are your church's needs? Ask questions of your own church and its long-term needs before you "rebound" against the last minister. Tony Hopkins, pastor of First Baptist Church, Greenwood, SC, says, "There are a lot of good men and a lot of good women, but many of them ought not to be married to each other. There are a lot of good ministers and a lot of good churches, but many of them ought not to be married to each other." Somewhere in the conversation, a church and a potential minister need to communicate honestly about strengths, challenges, and weaknesses, as well as opportunities for mutual growth and improvement. The goal is compatibility.

5 IGNORING POWER ISSUES. Churches can be very human institutions. Beware of church or committee members who have agendas which can range from helping their brother-in-law find a job to pushing some secular political agenda. Consensus is desirable, but be cautious when one or two members hold a committee hostage. I have seen two votes beat seven, and eventually split a church. Search committees need to be prayerfully discerning and shrewd about the way some people, even in churches, might be tempted to manipulate the search process.

6 LAZINESS. Hard to believe that when called to a position of responsibility within God's church, some people will resist the hard work required. Our organization uses a "high tech" data base to supplement our "high touch" ministry of introduction. We want to get the right person in the right church, so we ask questions that take about 45 minutes to answer. Our experience in Reference and Referral tells us these are important issues for committees to discuss. Some churches do not want to take the time to respond to questions that will help them and us to discern the type of person they are hoping to call. They want to have a quick meeting (under an hour), then make a few phone calls, and then succeed! Neither God nor the world ordinarily work that way.