

DR. JOEL HATHAWAY

*FINDING
A
PASTOR*

**A HANDBOOK FOR
MINISTERIAL SEARCH COMMITTEES**

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DISCIPLESHIP MINISTRIES

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INTRODUCTION

A MINISTERIAL SEARCH COMMITTEE is tasked with identifying a spiritual leader with the training and experience requisite for the congregation and context in which he or she will be hired to serve. This is a serious undertaking. The task demands that the committee have a patient humility that is direct and explorative, a capacity for self-reflection and, above all, a dependence upon the Holy Spirit. The process of finding a new pastor will be tumultuous, but it does not have to be traumatic. It is difficult, but does not have to be destructive.

The challenges of hiring, retaining, and sustaining ministry leaders in vocational settings are not primarily challenges of theological discourse or academic expression. The challenges begin with *you*: the individuals chosen by your congregation to participate in or potentially lead a pastoral search process—and they are as much relational, behavioral, and emotional as they are spiritual. How well a search committee understands in the simplest terms the organizational dynamics of its congregation and the committee members' own emotional-behavioral patterns around areas of fear, change, transition, power, and leadership (to name just a few) will impact success or guarantee failure in the pastoral search process.

Larger, more resourced churches looking for professional guidance in the pastoral hiring practice have access to many paid consultants. The process outlined here still applies to these large and complicated organizations. However, this resource was crafted for the majority of churches around the world—those with under 200 attendees. These congregations tend to have fewer resources available, fewer support networks to draw on, and are usually more isolated regionally and denominationally. These churches think of a pastoral search process in more traditional, even parish, terms.

They are less aware of the complex system that places them in a model of knowledge-dependency and system-interconnectivity. More simply put, these churches are less aware of the interplay of organizational styles and personal preferences that can keep them mired in old habits and old ways of thinking.

Our desire is to help these churches grow in spiritual health, emotional awareness, and theological depth, as well as prepare them to hire godly leaders for their various ministry positions—leaders who are broken but redeemed, who use their gifts to serve in largely anonymous ways, who lead their congregations always with both hands pointed to the true head of the church, Jesus Christ. In other words, this resource was written for *you*.

For all these reasons, I have taken great care to craft this guide in terms that any thinking congregation member can understand. Some may argue that I have simplified it too much, but I do not buy into the notion that to be meaningful one must speak in profound and complex terms. The aim here is to provide practical, real-world assistance to those who will give a great deal of time and energy to the difficult task of identifying and selecting new church leaders. Clarity and concision have thus been my goal.

Finally, the approach described here was developed to allow a search committee to adequately, fairly, and without bias evaluate both internal and external candidates using the same process and criteria. For the sake of the internal candidate and his or her family, and that of the congregation, a search committee's final recommendation on an internal candidate needs to stand up to the same robust test of evaluation as any external candidate.

In what follows, I depend and build upon the long years of experience of Dr. Philip D. Douglass, whose research, teaching, and insights have been formative for my thinking in this area.

PART ONE

The Pastoral Search Committee: People and Process

I. Establishing a Search Committee

DEFINITIONS

As we begin, here's a definition that many would say describes the make-up and purpose of a search committee:

A search committee is a collection of individuals (not a “group”) elected to a task (not a process) for which they have not been trained: to determine the fitness of one candidate (among many) for a position about which the committee members have minimal experience, limited understanding, and almost no organizational knowledge.

Let me first expound on the terminology of this definition before considering some of the objections to it that may arise.

- ***Collection of individuals*** means that the search committee is not a homogenous or cohesive group simply because all the people on the committee have been elected to a common task. The journey toward becoming a cohesive group is a months-long process at best, while the

hope of becoming completely homogenous usually goes unrealized.

- ***Elected*** simply means that most search committees come into existence through a standardized nomination/election process.
- ***Task*** means that most committees view their job as a task that is limited, definable, process-oriented, and has specific mileposts along the way toward completion. However, in practice the work of a committee is more of an ongoing process involving the development of the committee's own collective identity, a differentiated relationship with the church it represents, and the recognition that the committee's work is less technical than adaptive (that is, more ambiguous, indefinable, varied, and unpredictable), which requires ongoing and active learning.
- ***Not trained*** means that most committees do not go through an intentional, thorough orientation. Even fewer are trained by skilled practitioners for the process to which they have been elected. Many denominations or individual congregations have bylaws describing the make-up, election, and scope of a search committee. From there, committees are expected to "figure it out as they go." This often involves drawing from similar but imprecise, even non-transferable experience in another industry. For example, committee members who have worked with a corporate human resources team will often assume that their experience in that setting is immediately applicable to the church context.
- ***One candidate*** means one from among the many potential applicants.
- ***Fitness*** means that there are capacities, characteristics, and qualities desired in a candidate. However, the identification of these capacities, characteristics, and qualities in one candidate over and against all others requires a process thorough and consistent enough to produce

reliable results and dynamic enough to adjust along the way.

- ***Position*** refers to the role the minister will assume, whether senior, solo, associate, youth, worship, women's, discipleship, or other support role—with all its duties, responsibilities, and expectations, written and unwritten, spoken and unspoken.
- ***Minimal experience and limited understanding*** means that few if any members on a search committee have ever served in the position for which they are interviewing candidates. This lack of personal experience is a knowledge gap for most committees, leaving them unclear on how daily expectations regularly differ from a clear, defined job description.
- ***Organizational knowledge*** refers to actual knowledge about the search process from within the committee's church. If a committee performs its process well, it should not have to repeat the process again with any regularity. Thus, a church replacing a pastor after 20 years has little relevant organizational knowledge about how the process was last handled. For most churches, if search committees are formed with regularity, either the committee is unsure of how to manage the process or the process itself is not working to identify best-fit candidates. In either event, the outcome is the same: frequent pastoral turnover.

Common objections to this definition and the need for an identifiable search committee process include statements like the following:

- “We are educated people. We can figure out the process ourselves.”
- “We know our church better than anybody on the outside. That makes us the best people for this job.”

- “We’ve done this before. We know what we’re doing.”
- “Lots of us have helped with hiring in our companies. How is this any different?”
- “This process cannot be that hard.”
- “We’re trusting the Spirit to guide us along the way.”

My assumption is that members of search committees are educated people who know and love their churches, who have practical life experience—and sometimes even technical business experience—who depend upon the leading of the Holy Spirit. If they are lacking in any of these areas, especially in trust of the Spirit, this should be the first concern.

But after working with and studying hundreds of search committees, my experience is that the process is harder and more complex than most committees know. It will take longer than anticipated and stretch members beyond observed experience. It is unlike any other hiring process. The best analogy comes from the family business model. The hired individual will have formal duties and expectations. There will be evaluations and performance feedback, but this person is also part of “the family.” He or she will share meals with you, be a guest in your homes, and be invited into the most intimate parts of your lives.

These challenges do not free search committees to adapt a “let go and let God” approach. Because the Holy Spirit is an active member of every pastoral search team, it is all the more important for committees to seek wisdom and understanding, and to develop and adopt best practices for the identification of their next pastor. If you are on a search committee, you are not just helping your congregation to call a pastor. You are helping to call the person who will be one of—if not the most—regular articulators of the gospel in your church, for your family, and to unbelievers yet to receive the gospel of grace. That is no small undertaking.

QUESTION:

How has your committee sought to identify its knowledge gaps?

COMMITTEE COMPOSITION

The composition of the committee will reflect your church's theological beliefs, communal values, and organizational practices. Churches that place a higher value on the influence of leadership will tend to put more elders and other elected officers onto a search committee. Churches that practice a robust complementarianism will tend to broaden representation to include non-ordained and non-officer men and women. Still other churches practice a broad egalitarianism.

I specifically want to focus on those committees that hold to a firm complementarianism. Please do not displace, by intent or oversight, the role godly women in the congregation have in the pastoral search committee. Most candidates are called to minister broadly to many ages, to those in various stages of marriage and singleness, and to both men and women. Committees that exclude godly women in the church from advising, serving alongside, and speaking into the ministerial search process are more likely to miss negative emotional, relational, and behavioral indicators expressed by candidates. Women and children are most likely to experience these negative relational realities. If news of the abuse of power in congregations is not enough of a sobering reason to include a diversity of people of spiritual maturity on the search committee, then consider the words of the apostle Paul, who warns against the tendency of those in power to abuse it (see 2 Cor. 11:21).

We recommend that the search committee be composed of five to seven voting members, with representation from:

- the church leaders (e.g., elders or deacons),
- men and women in various roles of service who have informal power in the congregation,
- and a range of members from those who are newer to those who are more established.

All committee members should be growing in sanctification toward spiritual maturity.

More than seven members on a committee makes unanimity less likely. Committees that have more than seven voting members typically establish a threshold of agreement in a more democratic fashion. For example, one church we worked with had nine voting members on the committee, with the written agreement that seven members had to agree on a candidate before he would be asked to visit.

Many committees also have alternative members: one or two people who observe the candidate evaluation process from the very beginning. These people are included in the committee evaluation exercise. They can ask questions and speak to issues throughout the process, and they can become voting members of the committee if a standing member recuses herself or resigns from the committee. Life circumstances—the birth of a baby, a job transition along with a physical move, or health issues—are the main causes of a voting member leaving the committee. Committees are commended to plan for the loss of a committee member by electing alternative, back-up members.

SEARCH PROCESS TIMELINE

The search process will take longer for some churches than for others, depending on a variety of factors that will be outlined in the following pages. In general, the timeline presented here offers a good estimate based on our experience of the time involved for each stage of the process.

MONTHS	ACTION/TASKS
1	Committee formed
2 – 3	Committee Dynamics Exercise
3 – 4	Committee Dynamics Exercise continued / Congregational Survey conducted
5	Congregational Survey evaluated / Job Description (version 1) formed
6 – 7	Interview Best-Fit Candidates / Job Description (version 2) formed
7 – 8	Job Description (version 2) continued / First Candidates: Written Questionnaire, Listen to Sermons
9 – 10	Second Candidates: Written Questionnaire, Listen to Sermons / First Candidates: Phone Interview
11 – 13	Third Candidates: Written Questionnaire, Listen to sermons / Second Candidates: Phone Interview / Eliminate or Decline Candidates
14 – 15	Retained Candidates: Second Interview (video) / Interview References
16 – 17	Retained Candidates: Site Visit / Vote before next candidate visits
18	Job Offered / Accepted