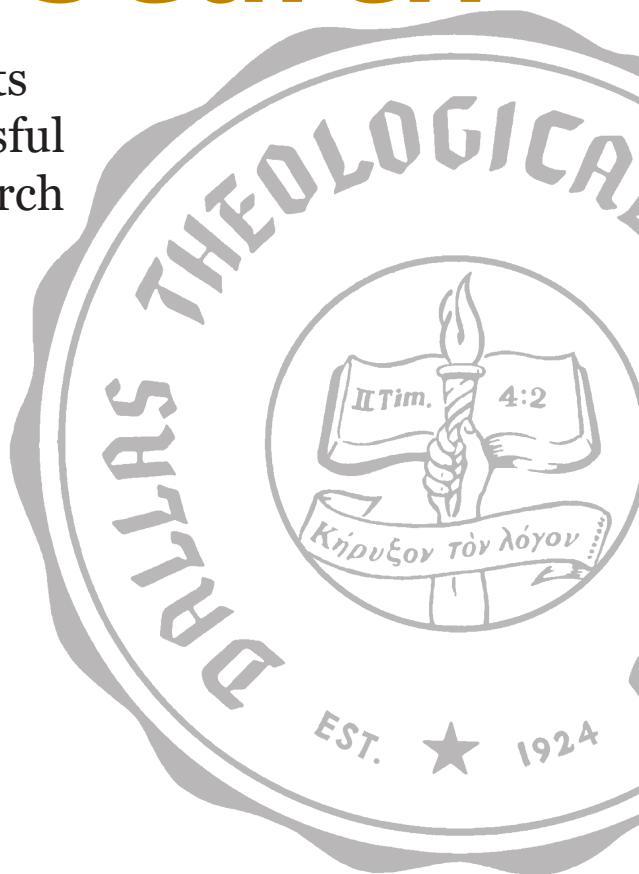
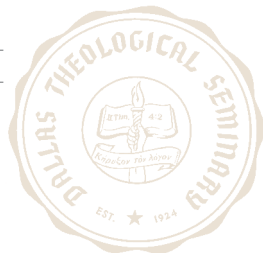


The Search

Helpful Hints
for a Successful
Pastoral Search
Process



From the Dallas Theological Seminary Career Services Office



Introduction

“Any local church has episodes in its history that may alter both its life and its future. One such event is a change in pastoral leadership. Because of the position and influence of the pastor within a congregation, the calling of a man to shepherd the flock becomes an all-important decision.”¹

This booklet suggests an orderly process for a search committee in finding a good match between the church and a senior pastor. *The Search* is written primarily with the senior pastor in mind; however, many of the steps can be applied in filling associate positions. By following an objective process, a church increases its probability of encountering a good match. Ultimately, you must trust God’s leading to provide a person who will lead a ministry that honors and glorifies Him.

The normal search process ranges from eight to eighteen months. The church needs time to say goodbye to the former pastor, prepare to receive a new leader, and initiate the search process. Your church’s constitution or bylaws may call for an established period of time before initiating the search. This is also a potential time to hire an experienced interim pastor.

After establishing the search committee, the process can be divided into three main areas:

- Who are WE? Developing a church and pastor profile
- Who are THEY? Finding and evaluating candidates
- Who is THE ONE? Choosing the pastor

Consider other questions as the search is initiated. How long did the previous pastor fill the position? (A longer interim period may be needed if the previous pastor had a long tenure.) What were the circumstances of the pastor’s departure? Other variables unique to your church may influence how the search is conducted.

Step 1 – Establish a Search Committee

The search committee is essential in finding the right person to shepherd the flock, facilitate the vision, and set practical goals for the church. The committee should decide on an overall plan for the pastoral search process, and, along with the church leadership, identify and confirm that pastoral responsibilities are delegated for the interim. The leadership should also review the employment status of associate staff and discuss this process with them. Keep the staff informed.

Practical steps when establishing a search committee:

Tip
Pray!

Select the committee members

The smaller the committee, the better, with an odd number of members recommended. Five to nine members is suggested. The larger a committee, the more complex and time-consuming the process can be, and its effectiveness may be diminished.

The makeup of the committee should be a broad representation of the church, but should consist of mature individuals who will represent the entire church, and not their own particular agendas. The committee members should demonstrate strong spiritual maturity, experience in ministry, and a solid biblical foundation.

Select the committee officers

There should be at least a chairman, vice-chairman, and a recording secretary. A financial secretary may be needed depending on the scope of the search.

Establish a regular meeting schedule

To be effective, plan to meet weekly, at least at the beginning of the search process. Unneeded meetings can be canceled. Plan to meet for one to three hours in order to discuss the search progress and individual candidates.

Take into account that pastoral prospects are not likely to wait around for months and months if other opportunities become available. The regular weekly meetings will allow quick responses to candidate inquiries.

Establish search committee guidelines

A set of well-defined guidelines will assure an orderly and fair meeting. Establish an agenda of items to be covered at each meeting.



Establish voting rules and procedures

Seek a consensus on all matters. Decide how unified the search committee must be in order to proceed with a proposed action. If one member strongly disagrees with a decision, the matter should probably be set aside until full agreement, or until some alternate decision can be reached.

Consider preliminary parameters

Determine the limitations or parameters your church needs to consider; these may include finances, church appeal, community appeal, and doctrinal position. Make a simple list of desirable pastoral traits. These preliminary parameters are general characteristics that will be refined later, but help focus the committee and its communication.

Items to be considered for your list are the biblical qualities in leadership as outlined in I Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:5–9, theology/doctrine, geographic limits, salary range, desired education and experience, denominational background, spiritual qualities, family size, and marital status.

Establish a budget

Searching for a pastor costs money. Establishing a separate pastoral search fund will reflect the true costs of finding a pastor and will allow accurate reporting to the congregation. Provide periodic accounting for the funds. Monthly reporting to the pastoral search team and the church leadership will provide sound financial accountability.

In establishing the budget, ask the following questions:

- How many contacts do you anticipate?
- How many prospects do you hope to eliminate from the selection process?
- How many prospects might you arrange to visit the church?

Arrange a fund for the search process. Secure leadership approval and establish the account with appropriate checks.

Step 2 – Develop a Church Profile

Developing a profile of who you are as a church may reveal strengths and weaknesses of the church to the leadership and members. A self-administered congregational survey may help establish this profile. It is helpful to include information about the community in which the church is located, as well as information about the church itself.

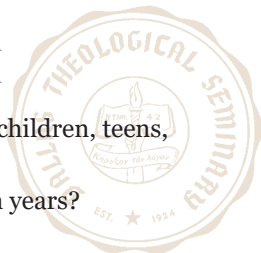
This honest evaluation will assist prospective candidates in making an informed decision. It will also direct the search process to establish a better match. Make sure the church profile is an honest representation of the church, and not just a representation of what the search committee would like the church to be. The more time you spend understanding who you are, the easier the rest of the process will be, and the more confident the final decision.

Community profile

- How would you describe the community (rural, suburban, urban, small city, and so forth)?
- What are the school districts like? What is their proximity to the church?
- What is the current population of the city?
- What are the population trends for the city (growing, plateaued, declining, and so forth)?
- What are the main types of industry and/or businesses present in the community?
- What ethnic groups are represented in the community?

Church profile

- What is your ministry direction and philosophy?
- What are your current ministries?
- What is your church culture (relaxed, formal, white-collar)?
- What are the strengths of the church? What do you do well?
- What are the weaknesses of the church? Where do you need to change and grow?
- What is the average age of the members of the church?



- What is the composition of the church (men, women, children, teens, singles)?
- What are the possible challenges of the next five to ten years?
- What is your form of church government?
- How does your church respond to change?
- How do you reach and impact your community?
- How is your worship style best summarized (blended, traditional, contemporary)?
- How would you describe a typical church member?
- Why does your church exist?
- What would you say you are “for” as a church? What are you “against” as a church?
- How do you grow people spiritually?
- What are your general expectations of a pastor? Describe desirable traits such as, “the pastor should be...visionary, a good expositor, one who can be a bridge between a variety of cultures.”
- What makes up your mission program?
- What is the history of the church?
- What pastors have previously been at the church and for how long?
- How would you describe your leadership structure and style?
- Are there any plans for future expansion?

Step 3 – Develop a Pastor Profile

Define the objectives of the position

It may be helpful to think in three areas: preaching/teaching, shepherding/nurturing, and leadership/administration. On a scale of one to ten, decide how important each area is to you. Where do you want your pastor to be strong? If you find someone who is strong in two out of the three areas, you probably have a good pastor.

Tip

Keep the main thing the main thing! According to Psalm 78:72, the candidate you choose should have “integrity of heart” (character), and “skillfulness of hand” (competence).

1. Preaching/Teaching

- What type of preaching style is the church accustomed to?
- Will the church be expecting more of a preacher or a teacher?
- What would a preaching schedule look like?

2. Shepherding/Nurturing

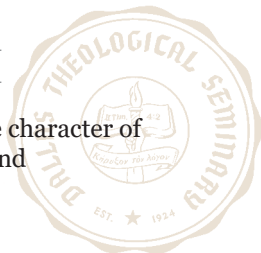
- Is the pastor expected to spend time with every member when they are in crisis?
- Will the pastor be expected to do all of the hospital visitations?
- Is the pastor expected to visit all new visitors and do the work of an evangelist?
- Can the pastor be quiet and withdrawn in private if his sermons are great?
- Should the pastor meet with the leadership regularly, both one on one and in meetings?

3. Leadership/Administration

- Is the pastor the primary change agent in your church?
- How will the pastor be expected to lead?
- What is the relationship between the pastor and elders or church board?

Write a job description

This job description should be more realistic than idealistic: what a person could do in the time available and with normal expectations. It reflects the real needs of the congregation and the desired future mission of the church.



Be specific. The right match can only happen when the true character of the people and a pastor are known and made as objective and quantifiable as possible.

- Make a list of the non-negotiable qualifications.
- Make a list of the desirable qualifications.
- Determine the necessary education requirements.
- Determine the necessary experience requirements.
- Determine the skills and strengths the candidate should possess.
- Determine what kinds of personality traits are desirable in order to complement the congregation.
- Define the specific terms and explain in detail what you mean by certain terms, phrases, and words. In other words, when you say, “We are interested in evangelism,” what exactly do you mean?

Outline the compensation package

Below is a list of some of the components included in an average compensation package. It is helpful for both you and potential applicants to give a compensation range at the beginning of the process. It is important that you discuss the total compensation package with your final candidates before offering them the position.

- Basic personal income — includes base salary and housing allowance
- Retirement benefits
- Insurance (medical, term life, disability, dental/vision, professional liability, long-term care, renter’s insurance for the items in the parsonage, if provided)
- Ministry expenses (reimbursed) including travel/auto, convention/conference, continuing education expenses, books/periodicals, other professional expenses and hospitality costs

Tip

The former pastor shared life experiences with the members that no subsequent pastor can. Constant comparison with the former pastor is unhealthy. There may be expectations that the new pastor will do the same things as the previous pastor. Surfacing these expectations will help eliminate a difficult transition.

Step 4 – Find Pastoral Candidates

Once the needs of the church are identified through the church and pastor profiles, the search committee outlines the qualifications of the new pastor. These qualifications will serve as the basis for finding and contacting pastoral applicants. Make sure the search committee and the church leadership are on the same page.

Secure names and résumés from the congregation The search committee now accepts names of potential candidates and recommendations of referral sources from the congregation. Many people within the congregation have contacts and networks that can provide names and résumés of potential candidates. A general request can be made to the people at large with a recommended cut-off date for receiving the information.

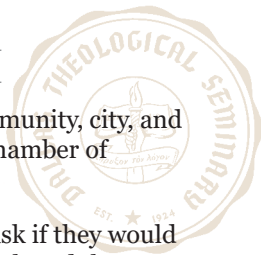
Secure names and résumés from top schools and seminaries Contact seminary and Bible college placement offices regarding prospective candidates. According to your church's doctrinal statement and background, determine which schools are appropriate for securing the names of potential candidates.

Network with other churches, Christian leaders, and pastors Contact known Christian leaders and pastors who may be aware of a larger pool of available and good candidates.

Seek denominational resources Contact denominational officers, leaders, superintendents, and area directors. They may know of pastors who desire a change but have not informed anyone else.

Stress the importance of confidentiality Remind the search committee of the significance of confidentiality. Some potential candidates may not want their name publicized.

Develop an information packet The search committee should develop an information packet for interested applicants. Include the church and pastor profiles, vision and mission statements of the church, doctrinal statement, a copy of the church budget, and the church constitution and bylaws. General information about the compensation package should also be included.



It is also appropriate to include information about the community, city, and state. You can get most of this information from the local chamber of commerce.

Designate committee members to contact candidates and ask if they would be willing to receive a packet of information about the church and the position.

Step 5 – Evaluating Prospective Candidates

ROUND ONE

Review the church and pastor profiles and match them with the candidates' résumés to eliminate individuals with whom there is definitely no match. The obvious areas of elimination would include glaring differences in theology or philosophy of ministry. Keep everyone in the congregation informed about the committee's progress.

Evaluating a résumé

Is the résumé organized? Does it follow a logical, concise pattern? If your church is informal and creative, look for creativity in the candidate's résumé.

The résumé should provide enough information to identify a match between your church profile and the type of pastor for whom you are searching. Be observant and look for exaggeration or vague statements needing clarification.

A well thought-out format and structure demonstrates a neat and organized leader who studies, preaches, and leads in the same manner.

Learn to look for what is missing, especially as it relates to personal information. The résumé should provide information about the person's conversion, calling, family, and personal walk with the Lord. Contact the institution(s) listed if you need understanding of the degrees candidates have obtained.

ROUND TWO

Contact the remaining candidates for availability. Some may have taken another church or decided not to pursue a change of ministry. Send information about the church and position to candidates who indicate they are available. You may want to use a questionnaire or an application to ask important questions and obtain valuable information. There may be many qualified candidates but not all will be a good “fit” with your ministry.

Use initial telephone contacts to screen and evaluate the prospective candidates. Face-to-face meetings usually occur after you have made at least two phone contacts—one individual phone contact followed by a conference call. The key to successful telephone contacts is to prepare in advance. Plan your questions, but also be flexible: leave room to proceed through a discussion that is important to you and the candidate. Phone or Skype conversations should generally last between thirty and sixty minutes.

The first individual phone interview will probably reduce the number of potential candidates significantly. Learn as much as possible about a candidate through those phone contacts before a face-to-face interview. Review important areas to get a sense of common ground and to determine the fit. Doing so will aid the committee in understanding the candidate’s personality, sense of humor, and desire to pursue the candidating process further. After the phone conversations, narrow down the number of candidates to between ten and twenty to allow the search committee to focus on candidates with a good match potential for the church. Determine the appropriate time and place to contact the candidate.

Tip

Ask only those questions that will help you evaluate the candidates in this round. You can also ask for a video of a recent message. If you ask for more information, you might want to send them a thoughtful note or gift to let them know you appreciate their time. Remember this process is a ministry.

Generally, search committee members call between 7 and 9 p.m. during the week, and usually at the candidate’s home number, unless directed otherwise. Every search committee member should share responsibility in personally calling the candidates.

Keep the candidates informed of their standing in the process. Acknowledgment is important in each step of the search.



A list of questions to ask candidates during your phone conversations and during the candidating process is available online.

Following the first phone contact

- Determine if there was a good match between the candidate and the church profile. Is this candidate a good “fit” for your church?
- Decide what new questions arose that need answering.
- Determine what areas need further clarification.
- Determine if the candidate should be kept in the pool or eliminated. Remember to write letters to candidates who are no longer under consideration.
- Determine the references to be contacted.
- Establish who on the search committee should do the reference check, which takes place in the next round.

ROUND THREE

Review the candidate’s completed application and questionnaire, if you chose to use one or both. View or listen to their sermon as a group or as individuals, whichever is appropriate. Schedule a follow-up meeting or conference call with the entire search committee to discuss the presentation or answer other questions that have surfaced. At this point, try to narrow the list down to your top two or three candidates. Once again, keep the congregation informed on how the committee is proceeding in the search.

Evaluating all material

If there are gaps in either the ministry or employment history, ask the candidate about these time periods, for clarification and understanding.

Review the education accomplishments of the candidate. Be certain you are familiar with the schools and the courses of study the candidate accomplished. You may want to verify the accomplishments of the degree or course of study with the school(s) indicated on the candidate’s résumé.

Note personal interests, hobbies, and skills that would reveal more about the person and the matching potential.

Family information, spouse background, and personal interests reveal personal values, character, and how candidates relate to their families.

Always be aware of inconsistencies with the provided information. Address those inconsistencies as soon as possible in order to facilitate a good match.

Evaluating a sermon

- What does the passage or topic reveal to us?
- What does the passage mean?
- How does it apply to me?
- Was the exposition true to the text?
- Was the presentation clear and easy to follow?
- Did the candidate possess a natural and appropriate sense of humor?
- Was there a spiritual passion that flowed from a personal walk with God?
- Did you learn anything from listening to the sermon?
- Would you pass the sermon on to someone else?
- Would you listen to that person again?

Checking references

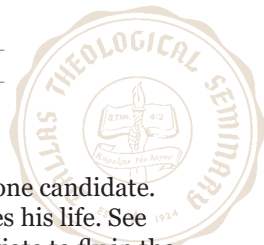
Ask the potential candidate permission to call his references. If so, call the references and ask questions that have surfaced about the candidate.

Ask each reference for another reference that may not be listed on the résumé; go “two references deep.” Call the references’ references. Talk with prior employers and churches listed on the résumé. Make sure you ask tough questions designed to surface relevant information.

Ask permission of the candidate to conduct both a criminal and credit background check.

Tip

Remember, this process is a ministry from start to finish. Communicate often. Send progress notes, and letters of both acceptance and rejection. A servant spirit should pervade every action the search committee makes. Be sensitive to the candidates and their family situations. Help them feel special.



ROUND FOUR

The search committee should be ready to narrow down to one candidate. Take time to travel, spend time with, and see who influences his life. See how he operates in his own environment. It is also appropriate to fly in the candidate and spouse for a short visit to determine if the process should continue to go forward. This short visit allows time for further dialogue with the entire search committee, as well as the opportunity for the candidate to observe a worship service. Remember the prospective candidate is also seeking God's will to determine if this is where he should minister.

If this brief visit confirms the matching process, and there is a unified and positive response from the congregation, then the search committee may offer the opportunity for the candidate to come for a few days of candidating.

Avoid putting your final candidates in the awkward position of being the ones to bring up the topic of compensation. Your final one or two candidates should know the details regarding the salary, benefits, insurance, and/or housing allowance that the ministry is offering.

Step 6 – Choosing the Pastor

Establish dates for the candidating period. The candidate and the congregation should be informed of the schedule in writing with dates, times, locations, and expectations. The candidate and spouse should be informed about the type of dress expected, the places they will stay, and the names of individuals assisting them. This should be an encouraging time of ministry and understanding. Ministry happening at this time should be reflective of the true nature of the church and the candidate.

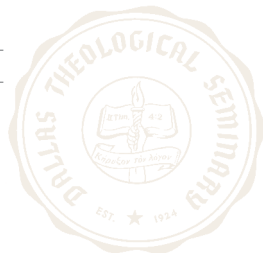
The church and candidate should have shared values and culture. A church and pastor are a great deal like a large family where real acceptance and cooperation flow from a relationship that begins with common interest, and develops over time with shared life experiences.

Selecting the pastor and offering the position should be a unanimous decision among the search committee and the leadership. There should be complete agreement with doctrinal issues, philosophy of ministry, the purpose of the church, and the style of worship. One candidate should be presented to the church for the position.

When the candidating period has ended, the leadership and/or congregation should vote in accordance with the constitution or bylaws of the church. The results of the vote should be shared with the candidate, giving him an opportunity to accept or reject the call. When the call is accepted, the leadership should move immediately to establish the details involving the starting date of ministry, the move, and how the congregation will be able to help in the process. Announce the decision to the congregation and remember to contact everyone involved (schools, denominations, etc.) to let them know the position has been filled.

You have a wonderful opportunity to sense God's leading and provision through your pastoral search. May God richly bless you and your church fellowship.

¹ Johnson, Wesley E. *The Right Pastor: Seeking God's Man for Your Church*, Schaumburg, IL: Regular Baptist Press, page 7.



Resources Available

The Placement Office at Dallas Theological Seminary can assist you with

- Interim ministry resources
- Sample church profiles
- Sample interview questions
- Compensation package statistics
- Bibliography of search resources

Contact the Career Services Office at CareerServices@dts.edu or 888-DTS-ALUM. Resources are available at alumni.dts.edu/career-services/churches-and-ministries/.