

Practical Ethics in the Search Process for Candidates and Search Committees

by Bruce McAllister

Both candidates and churches only occasionally in life find themselves actively in the search for God's will for the next place of ministry or the next pastor. Some men have never needed to search for an opportunity to pastor. Some churches have pastors who serve a long time, and therefore the church may not have looked for a new pastor for 30 or 40 years. Church members and lay leaders may have never been personally involved on a pastoral search committee and are not familiar with some of the practical ethics involved. Our GFA church staffing website provides numerous articles under "Helps," as well as excellent books and podcasts. These resources explore the details of the search process in great depth. This article is a brief reminder of key ethical pointers for candidates and churches to review.

Be Confidential

Search committee members must keep matters discussed confidential. They should not share information with family, friends, or church members. The chairman of the committee is usually the only one who speaks officially to the church about the progress of the search. Some candidates are currently employed by another ministry. Talking out of committee about prospective candidates could get back to the candidate's current ministry employer and create serious problems for him. Similarly, candidates should be careful to maintain confidence when a church approaches him about his willingness to be considered. While a candidate can get advice from his key personal advisors, he should still be tight-lipped. It is surprising how well leaders in the church world know one another. Caution and confidentiality in communication are invaluable.

Be Considerate

Churches should be careful about recruiting an employee from another church or ministry to join their ministry as pastor or as a pastoral staff member. The "Golden Rule" applies here. Ask yourself, "How would I like to be treated?" Would you like to have a staff member that you have invested in, mentored, and developed to suddenly be lured away by another more promising ministry? Now we know that pastors and pastoral staff members (assistant pastors, youth pastors, music pastors) can sense when it is time for a change of ministry. Once the one seeking to change ministries lets his wishes be known to others or seeks help through a church staffing service, it is fine for another ministry to pursue him. If a church wants to pursue the employee of another church, for example considering an assistant pastor as pastoral candidate, it is ethical to first check with the senior pastor of his current church to get permission to pursue him. From another angle, it is wise for a pastoral staff member who is starting to look for another ministry to first have a conversation with his current senior pastor about his anticipated search and desire to relocate. Any future employer is going to

check a reference with the current employer, and it makes sense that this inquiry is not a surprise to the current employer.

In addition, know that sometimes the current employer (pastor) may not react well and could potentially release the employee sooner than expected. Caution is in order here. If the current employee is known for his loyalty and for not making trouble, the current employer should give the exiting employee ample time to find a new place of ministry, especially if the staff member is seeking to be a senior pastor for the first time. That search will likely take time. Hopefully an acceptable transition can be worked out for the good of everyone. One other note, churches in search of a new pastor should be cautious about pursuing the pastor of another church. Again, the Golden Rule applies, “Would you like to see your pastor to be taken away by another ministry?” Having considered all these angles, all parties must be committed to knowing and doing the Lord’s will and to trusting Him through all the considerations. Be ethical, considerate, and patient with one another.

Be Thorough

We believe good ethics includes appropriate transparency and openness. We state the following on GFA’s church staffing website: “Candidates should expect that each church will do its own thorough vetting, including financial and legal background checks. This also includes verifying references provided by the candidate and potentially exploring other references than those provided. Details can be worked out between the candidate and the church. It is highly unethical for a candidate to seek a new ministry if there are unresolved allegations of immorality, impropriety, indiscretion, or financial mismanagement. We would not knowingly allow such a candidate to use the GFA church staffing service. Churches should expect serious candidates to research prospective churches as thoroughly as possible. Churches should be forthright with candidates about the church’s financial situation and special circumstances as the relationship develops toward possible employment.” There should be no surprises for either party once employment begins—like discovering an undisclosed debt or pending legal issue.

Be Forthright

Every church is built on a doctrinal and historical foundation. Every church has a culture. Churches are not interested in a new pastor pushing the church off its foundation or significantly changing the church’s culture. Both the church and the candidate should be forthright about their doctrine, convictions, practices, goals, applications, associations, and preferences. The big issues today seem to be worship and musical style, translation usage, and Calvinism/Arminianism. It is unethical for a prospective candidate to hide his true convictions and then take the church in a different direction once he is pastor. Likewise, it is unethical for a pastor whose viewpoint of these matters changes *after* he becomes pastor to then take the church in his own new direction. If the pastor changes, he should resign from his current ministry and find a compatible place of ministry. He should not split the church and start a new church with the people he persuades of his new ideas. That is unethical. Neither should the pastor run off the veteran people from the church, those who built the ministry for

years and do not agree with the new direction. That is also highly unethical. If the pastor changes, he should be honest and humble and leave graciously. In addition, the candidate should disclose any personal pursuits such as additional education, military reserve chaplaincy, and time-consuming hobbies. Family matters such as the church's expectations for the pastor's wife, educational choice for their children, and vacation time should also be shared openly.

Be Honest

Sometimes it is obvious to everyone that a church needs new leadership that will challenge the church to grow and change to be more pleasing to the Lord. Perhaps the depth of the preaching and teaching needs improvement. Perhaps the worship needs to be much more God-centered. The prayer life of the church may need to deepen. Maybe the community outreach has been neglected so that there is little evangelism or internal discipleship. There may need to be other positive changes. Change will take time and will involve soul searching and commitment on everyone's part. A skilled and loving pastor will find ways by God's grace and wisdom to move the church to please the Lord more effectively. It is good for lay leaders to discuss these matters before calling a new pastor. Discuss these matters with the prospective candidate. Hear his heart. Sense his leadership skills and attitudes. Some candidates are more maintainers while others are builders. Be sure that there is honest agreement about the future of the church.

Be Communicative

Both churches and candidates will be examining all their known options. They will be praying that the Lord will guide the entire process. In the end, both the churches and candidates will say "no" to all their other options and come together in an employment relationship in God's good timing. There are many more "no's" than "yes's" in the overall process, and the process can be long. Therefore, it is important for churches to let prospective candidates know where things stand and especially if they are no longer being considered. Likewise, it is important for candidates to inform churches if they are no longer interested.

Question: Is it OK for a candidate to be talking with two or more churches very seriously? Consider this analogy. It is fine for a single young adult to meet a variety of prospective people as he or she prayerfully seeks God's will for a life's mate. However, it is not permissible to be serious with or engaged to two people at the same time. While this is not a perfect analogy, it makes a point. It is acceptable for a prospective candidate to be talking with several churches at the same time. However, he should not be raising expectations unduly or candidate at two or more churches simultaneously. If for some reason he is inclined to seriously consider two churches at the same time, he should tell both churches what he is doing. It is a small world. There is a high probability that this situation will eventually be known and cause alarm. Churches may feel misled, thus potentially damaging a man's credibility or testimony.

Be Clear

When the time is right and a candidate is under serious consideration, the search committee should be clear about the salary package the church is offering to the candidate. The candidate has a biblical and personal responsibility to provide for his wife and children. He should be shown the courtesy of knowing what to expect financially as the discussions become more serious and certainly before he is voted on as the new pastor. The committee would do well to provide this written information clearly in a timely way. Likewise, the candidate should have the privilege to explain the financial needs of his family without that being interpreted as being inappropriate. Pastors are facing an expensive financial culture today that is far different from a generation or two ago. Search committee members should be well-versed in today's expectations for pastoral compensation planning.

Be Wise

When the church votes on a candidate to be the new pastor, the church leadership should communicate the voting information to the candidate forthrightly and quickly. Of course, the committee should have already communicated the required constitutional minimum to vote in a new pastor. This minimum is usually 70-80% and hopefully no higher in the church constitution.

Candidates would naturally love to have a high percentage vote to call them, say 85-90% or more. But that is not always the case, and the reasons may have little or nothing to do with the man personally. People can vote negatively due to matters about how things have been handled or because their preferred candidate was not chosen by the search committee.

But hopefully, the church and the candidate will clearly perceive the Lord's will. Even if the desired high percentage vote is not achieved, God still may want the candidate to become the pastor and lead the church forward. Of course, the constitutional minimum vote must be met for the candidate to be called. It is a good idea for the chairman of the search committee to explain to the candidate why he thinks there was a concerning percentage of negative voting (say 20-30% negative). The candidate would naturally desire to have the enthusiastic support of a high percentage of the congregation as he becomes pastor. A seasoned chairman of the search committee could offer insight and counsel that the candidate should seriously consider as he moves forward.

If the candidate receives a favorable vote, he should not delay long in letting the church know his decision, especially if he is saying "yes." Delaying will have the effect of "throwing cold water" on the situation, especially after a high percentage favorable vote. He could respond with an immediate "yes" or could pray another day or two about the matter and then let the chairman know his decision. If the candidate receives only a minimum (70%) or a bit higher percentage vote, then his decision may require a little more time and counsel. But he should let the chairman know his decision within five days or so, even in this scenario. As a rule, a candidate should not allow himself to get to the serious level of official candidating if he is not quite open to becoming the new pastor. He should not allow himself to be voted on unless he is certain that he will accept the new position, if he should get a high percentage vote of 90% or better. When a candidate turns down the position after a high percentage vote, it is devastating to the church.