

Senior Pastor Search Process Tips

Jeff Matas, Indiana Ministries

The process of searching for a new lead pastor can be both rewarding and frustrating. Most church search teams have limited experience in how to find a new lead pastor. That lack of experience can add to the frustration and is the reason for this document. The following ideas can aid the search team in fulfilling its responsibility in a satisfying and effective manner.

There are outside groups that will provide significant consultative services for a fee. If you'd like contact information on them, please contact me (765-623-2406 or jmatas@indianaministries.org).

Someone from Indiana Ministries would gladly meet with your search team and/or board if so desired to help you through some of these suggestions.

A good resource for at least the search team chair and vice-chairs to read is Search: The Pastoral Search Committee Handbook by William Vanderbloemen.

1. **Develop a profile of what the church needs in a new lead pastor.** Often search teams ask the church people what they want in a pastor, but what people want and what a church needs at that time in its history may be very different. One way to approach this is to determine where the church is in its life cycle. Keep in mind that most people will estimate that the church is closer to the beginning of the life cycle and farther from death than it really is.

For example, if a church is on the downside of the life cycle, then it needs someone who is catalytic in nature, a visionary, a leader willing to set a new direction, and sufficient people skills to get people to buy into a new vision. However, the church may want a good administrator (often the opposite of a visionary) or a chaplain.

After you develop a profile, determine what characteristics are primary and which are secondary. You may not find someone who has all the characteristics, so you need to determine which ones you won't compromise on.

Include the board in this process in order to prevent the search team from moving in a different direction than the board. Sometimes candidates have almost all their interview time with a search team and discover after arrival at the church that the board and the search team were on different pages.

2. **Develop a page description of your church and your community.** This will provide, but not be limited to, demographic information such as average attendance, number of people in various age groupings, education levels, economic level of your congregation, etc.... Approach it as though you were a pastor looking for a new ministry assignment. What would you want to know about the church and community before determining if you have any interest? Develop this into a packet including a map, promotional information provided by local Chamber of Commerce, etc... This can be used to introduce the church to someone you are interested in talking with. Process this with the board for agreement.
3. **A new Church of God pastor/church search engine has been developed by Church of God Ministries and went live at the end of April 2022. This software is called Atlas.** Information on this platform can be found here:
<https://www.jesusisthesubject.org/atlas/>.
 - Current access to Atlas includes:
 - Pastors/Ministers who previously had an account on CHOG 24-7
 - Churches who previously had an account on CHOG 24-7
 - Non-credentialed individuals on staff at a CHOG church who previously had an account on CHOG 24-7
 - Regional/State Pastors and Administrators

Any church data that was provided on CHOG 24/7 has transferred to Atlas. If your church had a valid CHOG 24/7 account, you should have received an email invitation to Atlas in your inbox or spam folders to complete registration on the new platform. If you did not receive this email, a request can be made at the link above in order to register your church. If you have problems with registering, contact Church of God Ministries at 1-800-848-2464 or email atlas@chog.org.

The previous Ministry Connector site is no longer valid. It is now called “Ministry Opportunities” which is a feature on the new Atlas portal. Once you have registered the church in the new Atlas platform, you may use the Ministry Opportunities feature to complete your own ministry search process.

4. **Send your one-page church and community summary and pastor profile to state and national leaders you have connections with, as well as pastors you are aware of.** Ask them if they know of any persons who fit the profile that they could recommend. Also let them know you aren’t just looking for suggestions of persons they know are looking to relocate. Some of your best prospects are persons who aren’t thinking about changing churches. Asking others for suggestions is a far more effective way to get names of good prospects rather than collecting resumes of persons that are sent in by individuals looking for a new ministry opportunity.
5. **Identify the main challenges/obstacles facing the church and opportunities it has.** This would be shared during the interview process. When the search team cannot readily answer this question if asked, it makes it appear unprepared for its assignment. Process this with the board in advance. If the candidate never asks a question like this, it also tells you something about the candidate. In getting a read on

a candidate, what he/she doesn't ask is sometimes as important as what he/she does ask.

6. **Be diligent and move forward in the search at a good pace.** Some churches take too long at various stages of the search process and lose out on viable candidates. Don't rush the process, but also don't let it drag. Sometimes churches move so slowly that candidates think they are no longer in consideration, or they accept another ministry opportunity. You can say that moving slow was part of God's timing to eliminate some people from consideration, but often that is just rationalizing poor leadership and administration. Keep prospects you are interested in informed about your process, next steps, and anticipated timeline.
7. **Establish times for the church to pray about the process, the search team, and the candidates.** Personal and corporate prayer is absolutely critical to the search process. This is not merely a human endeavor. Pray, pray, pray... Pray specifically for the pastor God has in store for you, his/her receptivity to the search team's inquiries, candidate's family (if married), and the candidate's church. Remember, having a pastor leave for another ministry opportunity can be traumatic for a church.
8. **Protect the confidentiality of every prospect diligently.** People in Church of God congregations are connected and frequently know each other or are related. News travels quickly. Not protecting the identity of persons you are talking to can prematurely end a ministry in a local church and/or at least foster distrust.
9. **Establish the steps you are going to follow in the search process and a timeline.** For example. . .
 - Develop new pastor profile and informational summary of congregation and community (3-4 weeks).
 - Send inquiries to state and national leaders and pastors you know and trust (1 week).
 - Gather names of candidates and resumes for 6 weeks.
 - Identify top 6 prospects and do an initial phone interview. Obtain copies of last two sermons preached (2 weeks).
 - Narrow list to top 2-3 prospects and either bring in or have some of team go and interview in person. Do a casual church visit but carefully protect the reason for being present. Decide in advance what you want to look for in the visit (4 weeks).
 - Check references and check credential status with the state office in which the person resides (1 week).
 - Ask your state pastor to make some calls about any serious candidate. Chances are, I will know people that know them that are not on their references. This will give you a more thorough process of due diligence on the candidate(s).
 - Have a second interview with candidates you are still interested in. While the initial interview may only include the pastoral candidate, you will want to include a spouse (if married) in all subsequent interviews. While the church is "hiring" only the pastor, interview time with the spouse will be incredibly insightful.

- Once you narrow your list of prospects down to one or two, have them complete a ministry assessment so you can make as informed a decision as possible. A bad hire (call) will cost the church 1-2x annual salary of the pastor (3-4 weeks). The Indiana Ministries office can direct you with the assessment piece and help the search team understand its value. The assessment is an extremely valuable tool in the search process.
- Within a week or two after the final assessment and receipt of the assessment report, decide on a single candidate to invite to an interview/candidating weekend with the understanding that the position of senior pastor is officially offered to him/her if the vote satisfies the church's by-laws requirement (tell candidate what that is).

10. Include behavioral questions in the interviews. Search teams often ask candidates what they think or what they believe. That doesn't give insight into a candidate's actual behaviors.

- For example, every pastor believes the church should reach lost people and make a difference in the community. But a candidate's behavior may not evidence that. So if a primary or secondary profile characteristic was having a heart for lost people or engaging the church in the community, ask for specific examples of how they have done this in the past. The best indicator of future performance is past performance.
- If the church needs a pastor who can help develop some new ministries, ask him/her to tell the search team about a ministry he/she developed from scratch.
- Ask how the candidate casts vision and request specific examples.
- Ask the candidate to tell you about a conflict situation they a.) handled well and b.) didn't handle well.
- Ask what the candidate does well and what he/she enjoys doing in ministry. Keep in mind that most candidates will spend the majority of their time doing what he/she enjoys regardless of the job description.
- Ask about strengths and weaknesses, devotional life, marriage, family life... The purpose is not to meddle or be nosey but to understand the emotional and relational health of the candidate.
- Ask about taking a day or two off each week and taking vacation time. If the candidate doesn't take care of him or herself and build margin in his/her life, it will have a negative impact on his/her ministry.

11. In advance of narrowing down candidate list to one or two people, discuss with the Board compensation package and moving & transition expenses that will be covered. Also, be certain of the process the search team must follow once it settles on a single candidate, i.e. does the Board have to sign off on the person before presenting him/her to the church?

12. Once you narrow it down to one person, discuss compensation package (see Calling Agreement) at the same time you let the person know you would like him/her to come and candidate.

- Present your offer to the candidate and then ask to touch base on their thoughts in a day or two. Ask for feedback on the package at that time. Remember, it is not unspiritual to discuss compensation. Most pastors find this incredibly awkward. Take initiative to reduce the awkwardness. Make it easy for the candidate to express his/her thoughts.
- Recommended package components are housing, Social Security allotment (pastors are treated by SS as self-employed but by IRS as employees of church. Some churches pay 7.65% - just like any other employee would - of SS and some pay the entire 15.3%), pension, and health insurance. Some also include dollars for life insurance and/or medical reimbursement for out-of-pocket expenses. Professional and business expenses are in addition to salary and fringe benefits and should not be confused with compensation.
- Follow up verbal offer in writing so the candidate is certain what you are offering.
- Be willing to be flexible on the package components.
- Housing is a huge concern when relocating. Selling a house and setting up new residence are major concerns for families. Be sensitive to these needs. You may want to offer additional compensation for a home down payment or to help if the couple has to sell the house for less than they paid for it.
- Include moving arrangements in the compensation offer. It is recommended that the church pay for professional movers to load the truck and move the furniture. This gesture expresses volumes of understanding about the work involved in moving and allows the new pastor to arrive with some energy instead of exhaustion. Agree on a start Sunday but begin pay the Monday before. Allow the weekdays prior to the first Sunday for moving and getting the family settled.
- Be generous with vacation time offered the pastor. Offer a minimum of three weeks of vacation. Remember that pastoral ministry is not a neat 9-5 job Monday-Friday. Pastors and their families typically must leave town to get genuine vacation time. If the person has ministry experience, consider that in how much vacation time is offered. All churches should have a vacation policy that identifies vacation time for pastors based on years served. That policy is always open to negotiation when calling a new pastor. At the very least match the amount of vacation the person is currently receiving. If possible, add a week. Vacation is an investment in the pastor's renewal. (After a new pastor arrives, allow him/her to designate housing allowance, etc.... Housing allowance, pension, and medical declarations can save the pastor tax dollars without costing the church.

13. Once a candidate is selected and agrees to candidate, schedule a church-wide weekend interview (candidating weekend).

- If pastor is married and has dependent kids, bring in the whole family.
- Put them up in a nice hotel, not in someone's home. It is very difficult for the clergy family to talk about the experience and debrief in someone else's home. Cover all transportation expenses, meals, and hotel costs. Inform them of this when you invite them for the interview weekend. Put your best foot forward.
- Give the clergy couple opportunity to meet with the church board (casual setting like a cookout) and other groups in the church. Also, have a general reception and have the pastor preach in morning worship.

- Allow time in the schedule for the family to see the area and begin to get a feel for the community. Have them present for up to a week if their schedules allow or at least Friday-Sunday. Have child-care arranged for times the clergy couple will be meeting with the church board or any other group that involves more serious conversation. You will want to suggest some fun activity(s) for the children. Be generous and cover that cost.
 - Select one person/couple in the church who is very personable and a great host/hostess to be the primary contact person for and with the candidate for the weekend. This person may or may not be on the church board. The goal of this person(s) is to make the visit as wonderful as possible for the clergy family.
14. **Communicate with each candidate still in consideration throughout the process.** Don't assume they can read your minds. Once you narrow down your candidate list to one person, let the others who were still in consideration know that the team is moving forward with another candidate. This may be awkward but will be appreciated.
 15. **Phone interviews can be helpful but have limited value. Face-to-face interviews are considerably more helpful.** You can probably determine you aren't interested in pursuing a candidate via a phone interview, but you can't determine how interested you are without talking face-to-face. Many churches try to save money by limiting face-to-face interviews. This approach will cost you in the long run. When doing initial phone interviews, have your questions prepared in advance and ask each candidate the same questions. A web interview might be more effective than just a phone interview.
 16. **Once you narrow down your short list to three or less, run a background check through the Indiana Ministries office.** Jenene is the one to call at 317.773.6477 or jlighty@indianaministries.org. The cost is \$35-55 depending on the kinds of background checks. The results need to be confidential to the search team members. You might want to narrow the list to one candidate before running this. This can also include checking in with another state ministry (if candidate is ordained) regarding their current credentials with the Church of God.
 17. **Once a person candidates and the church votes, promptly inform the candidate of the results and if that satisfies the minimum vote required by the church's by-laws.** Allow the person to take a week or two to respond to the invitation to be the church's next pastor. Many will tell you at this time if they accept the ministry position or not, but don't presume that they will. They may want more time to pray and talk about it. After offering the ministry position, ask them when they'd like you to contact them for a response. If the vote was insufficient to extend the call, be very upfront with the candidate and compassionate. It is disheartening and emotionally distressing for a candidate (and family) to go through a candidating weekend and not be offered the ministry position. If news of the person candidating has reached the church he/she pastors, continuing in that role may no longer be a possibility. This is one reason it is so important for a search team to do its due diligence in selecting a candidate and preparing the church for the candidating weekend.

- 18. Remember to communicate to candidates not selected – at least those on your short list.** Pastors are always telling me they often do not hear back from a church after the church has called a new pastor.
- 19. Communicate with the church (maybe a special email newsletter) throughout the process, even if you don't have new information to report.** Protect the identify of all candidates until you are ready to present one name to the church. Stress the importance of the church keeping that name confidential until the person either accepts or declines the invitation to become the pastor.
- 20. After a person accepts the new ministry position, designate a person to keep in contact with him/her.** There are a lot of transitional pieces to work out. This person might be the search team chair or a board member.
- 21. When the new pastor (and family) arrives, have a plan in place to make them feel welcomed.** Suggestions include...
 - find out what kinds of foods they enjoy and stock the pantry and refrigerator,
 - have persons donate gift cards to the clergy family's favorite restaurants,
 - have persons in the church sign up to deliver dinner (but not stay) once or twice a week for the first couple of months,
 - etc....
- 22. Consider an installation service for your new pastor.**