

The Top 6 Areas of Pastoral Search Evaluation

leader's digest
by JIM VOGEL

The task of a pastoral search committee in a church isn't what it used to be. It was never easy, but it seems to be especially demanding these days due to a diversity in ministry methodology and vision among pastors. I can't recall another time in my years of pastoring when there was so much variance among pastors as there is today. Finding a pastor who fits a church's vision and culture has never been more important and challenging. The work of the pastoral search committee requires prayerful vigilance and careful evaluation as never before.

The areas of evaluation that search committees pursue with potential pastors are many, and they all need to be addressed in the process of evaluating a potential pastor's fitness for a specific ministry. But I'm suggesting that the six areas of evaluation outlined here rise above the rest in helping to determine a pastoral fit for a specific church's ministry.

1. Personal qualifications

Godliness and character are at the heart of good pastoring, so search committees should ask questions of a pastoral candidate related to his practice of the spiritual disciplines and his personal spiritual growth. They should seek to determine a potential pastor's reputation regarding his wife and family, and his reputation in his church and community as a man of integrity. Is he known to be upright in his dealings and marked by kindness, honesty, humility, and wisdom?

2. Educational training

Formal ministry training marked by sound Biblical/doctrinal instruction is foundational to effective pastoral ministry. While we know that merely having degrees after one's name does not guarantee ministry success, we also know that adequate ministerial training can help put a man in a good position to capably preach and care for and lead a church. Search committees should note where a pastor went to school and the kind of training he received. Additionally, they could ask if he is committed to pursuing ongoing educational opportunities while he's in ministry to sharpen his ministry skills and convictions.

3. Doctrinal convictions

I've been disappointed in recent years by the willingness of some churches to minimize doctrine in pursuing a pastor who has great preaching ability or a winsome personality. Often in such cases the church's doctrinal integrity is eventually undermined, and confusion can result. (If the pastor himself does not fully agree with the church's doctrinal position, how can members be asked to do so? What doctrinal areas can they be permitted to ignore or disregard?) My advice: search committees

should ask any potential pastor if his convictions align fully with the church's doctrinal statement—not merely that he agrees in the sense of understanding, but that the church's doctrinal position represents what he personally believes to be the Bible's teaching. Be willing to reconsider any candidate who does not unreservedly affirm such doctrinal compatibility.

4. Pastoral experience

Nothing tells the story of a potential pastor's true convictions and ministry perspectives than his record of service. Beyond words of explanation and stated ministry passion is the testimony of actual pastoral ministry. (Some churches call qualified pastors right out of seminary; even these men often have experience in internships and ministries that can indicate a consistency with expressed convictions.) Search committees ought to take the time to evaluate past local church ministries of a potential pastor, and contact references who can affirm true giftedness and effectiveness. They should note pastors who have had a series of short-term or declining ministries and should be willing to ask hard questions in evaluating their experience, while at the same time acknowledging the challenges that some churches pose regardless of pastoral leadership.

5. Leadership and people skills

The Scriptural teaching is clear: pastors lead churches. But such pastoral leadership is to be servant oriented, marked by a humble spirit and a genuine love for their people—even the difficult and oppositional ones. Effective pastoral leaders possess the kind of people skills that enable them to bring people together to accomplish a common ministry vision. Pastoral search committees should ask questions about leadership gifts, to be sure, but they should also ask about how he handles disagreements, receives criticism, loves and cares for people, etc.

6. Ministry vision

Effective pastors are visionary leaders. They have the ability to not only envision an effective ministry future, but also to lead a church in accomplishing the vision. I suggest that pastoral search committees seek pastors who will move past mere "maintenance ministry" to proactive visionary leadership. Look for pastors who will take the time to understand a church's culture and community and who will guide the church in accomplishing its unique ministry vision. Ask a potential pastor about his vision for your church's future: What does he see as instrumental to your church's health and growth? What is his sense of your church's potential in reaching the community? What does he see as the effective means to that end?