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Pastor searches packed with perils

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When First Baptist Church of Everman started looking for a new pastor, résumés began streaming into the church office unsolicited.



Some of the résumés were sent by prominent Southern Baptist pastors who wrote to say they knew just the right man for the church. "They were very eager to place their person in our church," explained Sue Kelley, chairwoman of the pastor search committee.

The committee was astounded that such individuals would take an interest in the affairs of a church that averages 150 in attendance. And they were suspicious about claims by some writers that God had revealed to them who should be pastor of a church they knew nothing about, Kelley said.

At the same time, some candidates who sent their own résumés attempted to connect themselves with prominent pastors. Like the one candidate who sent a photo of himself with his arm around W.A.

Criswell, pastor emeritus of First Baptist Church of Dallas.

"We were offended," Kelley said. "And I would feel the same way if someone sent me a picture with their arm around Charles Wade," executive director of the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

Political pressure is just one of the challenges facing pastor search committees in Baptist churches today, according to Kelley and others well-versed in helping search committees.

The work of pastor search committees today is "much more difficult than it was" in the past, reported Vaughn Manning, a former Texas Baptist pastor and director of missions who now assists churches through the BGCT minister-church relations office.

The task is made more difficult, he said, both because of the political climate in Baptist life today and because of the changing expectations about pastors in churches.

The latter change is reflected even in the changing terminology used in Baptist churches today, added Gary Loudermilk, a former Texas pastor who now serves as director of missions for Denton Baptist Association. What once was known as a pulpit committee now is called a pastor search committee.

The new name is appropriate, because what the committee must deal with reaches far beyond what happens in the pulpit on Sunday mornings, he explained. It extends to spiritual gifts, ministry abilities, administrative skills and personality.

"At one point, we just looked at the pastor as a man of God who was going to come and preach the word," Loudermilk noted. "Now we have a variety of expectations. Pastoral candidates have a lot of different skills and gifts themselves. For the committee that takes all those things seriously, it becomes a much more complex time."

That's why Loudermilk and other denominational workers strongly encourage churches not to get in a hurry to find a new pastor and to begin the process by educating themselves.

In Denton Association, Loudermilk offers a two-hour training session for pastor search committees. He helps them understand what their role is, how to obtain information about their church and community, how to decipher a résumé and how to check references.

His role is not to suggest certain candidates to the church, he said, but to teach them how to run an effective search process.

Education is a primary need, he said, because most members of a pastor search committee never have served on such a committee before.

At First Baptist of Everman, Kelley is an exception to that rule. This is her third time to serve on a pastor search committee.

Because of her experience, she knew the committee needed to get outside help before sifting through résumés. She obtained copies of a search committee guide published by LifeWay Christian Resources, a book written by Paul Powell of Baylor University's Truett Seminary and a resource guide called "A Better Way" published by the BGCT.

After understanding their task, the committee began to seek input from the congregation. A survey was conducted through Sunday School classes. Members of the committee met personally with each youth and adult Sunday School department for dialogue.

Then the committee published the results of its survey for all the church to see. "We have tried so hard to tell our people what we're doing and what we found out," she said.

Next, the committee collected data about its community, association and other Baptist relationships.

Only after digesting all this information was the committee ready to review résumés, Kelley said. And by then, the résumés had come rolling in. Some had been solicited from state convention minister-church relations offices, where pastors looking for churches often post résumés for distribution. Others came from seminary placement services. Still others came from individuals unsolicited.

The committee first spent time praying as they reviewed the résumés, Kelley reported. Then they each ranked the résumés in order of preference and came back together to compare notes. From that process, about 50 résumés were reduced to nine for consideration.

Then the committee chose its top three candidates and contacted each one for additional information. Each of these three candidates was sent a questionnaire that explored issues such as personal call to ministry and perspective on denominational issues.

In the meantime, the committee also responded to everyone else for whom they had received a résumé, telling them how the committee was working and where they stood.

Since then, the committee has been talking with the top three candidates, one at a time, in a process of elimination.

The process adopted by the Everman committee follows closely the path recommended by denominational workers who have assisted hundreds of churches through pastoral searches.

The Everman committee touched almost every base suggested in Manning's workbook in what he calls the stages and tasks of interim ministry. After disengaging with the former pastor, the committee began a process of direction-finding, did a self-study, reviewed church history,

dealt with decision-making concerns, attempted to find consensus on identity, addressed denominational concerns, committed to the process of finding new leadership and began the search.

Once they find a candidate to recommend, they will negotiate details with that candidate, present the candidate to the church, see that he is called, installed and engaged.

"Calling the preacher is only half of it. Calling the church is the essential other half," said Jan Daehnert, director of the BGCT's minister-church relations office.

A wise committee, like the Everman committee, will seek to allay anxiety in the congregation by good planning in the early stages, he added. "The best work a church can do when a pastor leaves is pre-interim planning.

"Anxiety is what drives a church when the pastor leaves," Daehnert said. "The search committee needs to help find a way to have a non-anxious presence. ... What's done in the first four to six weeks determines what happens the next eight to 10 years."

Texas Baptist churches are fortunate to have many good pastoral candidates to choose from, he said. "The reservoir of qualified pastors is very strong. But the process to discover who we are as a church is very complex."

Ultimately, members of a pastor search committee will find the experience becomes highly emotional, Kelley said. "This is the most intense thing I've ever been involved in."

Because of this intensity, though, committee members must be on guard against making stupid mistakes, she warned. "It's so easy for a committee to get caught up in the emotional thing of this process. God gave you a brain, and you need to use it."

Even so, parting ways with a prospective pastoral candidate may be sweet sorrow, Kelley said. "You get to be really good friends with some of these people. ...

"It's like when one of your children has a boyfriend or a girlfriend you really like, and then it doesn't work out. And then you're disappointed."