

CALLING A SERVANT LEADER AS PASTOR

*by Mike Caraway
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As a layman, I chaired the pastor search committee for my church, Southland Baptist Church in San Angelo, when we called our second pastor and presently serve on the committee that is seeking our third. Our church is only 20 years old. I really do not bring a lot of experience to this topic. The truth is that, at our church, we don't want to get any more experience than we already have!

Servant Leadership Is a Revolutionary Idea

We have, however, had a lot of positive experience with servant leadership. Our previous pastors, Martus Miley and Dan Williams, epitomized servant leadership. I can say that with absolute confidence, based on extensive observation and experience with both of them as dear friends and as fellow church members.

Servant leadership is a revolutionary idea to many in Baptist life. We live in a time when the dominant view of the role of the pastor is not that of the *undershepherd/servant leader* but, rather, that of *ruler* of the church. To some, those who disagree with that interpretation are considered "wimps."

I realize that to choose the servant leader model is to go against the flow among Baptist churches of today. There are some critical questions I recommend asking in identifying a servant leader:

- Is he/she willing to leave behind the security of control and tolerate a healthy level of risk that the ministries will fail? In other words, does he/she *trust the people*?
- Is he/she willing to be interdependent on God and on others, recognizing that God is the ultimate guide and authority – and that the interpretation of that guidance by any one person, including the pastor, might be fallible?

The first question a search committee and a church must address is: *Do we want a servant leader?* I don't think there was ever any discussion in our search committee regarding the desirability of servant leadership. We felt God's leadership from the beginning to search for a servant leader to pastor Southland Baptist Church.

The First Tasks of the Search Process

Shortly after Martus went to another church in Houston, my church elected an 11-member search committee.

I must tell you that the first time the committee met, we all felt overwhelmed by the task before us. From the beginning, we committed to pray daily for each other, the church, and those we would meet in the search process.

If you are serving on a pastor search committee, you already know the value and importance of prayer. Prayer must be followed by sound judgment.

A wise decision we made was to invite Dr. Jesse Fletcher, chancellor of Hardin-Simmons University, to present an orientation to the search committee. His advice and input were invaluable, and he later served as our interim pastor. He was a valuable resource to the

committee and to me throughout the search process. Persons who have a broad range of ministry experience can provide insights often missed by laypeople.

Almost as soon as Martus resigned, we began to receive recommendations and résumés. Additionally, early in the process, the committee decided to broaden the pool of prospects by soliciting recommendations from people in Baptist life who knew Martus and were familiar with Southland Baptist Church.

This process of receiving solicited and unsolicited recommendations and résumés eventually produced over 100 résumés, and two of the solicited recommendations ultimately led us to Dan Williams.

Gather Information from the Church Body

The Search Committee asked our members to identify traits for which they were looking in a new pastor. Members of the committee went to every adult Sunday School class and to the youth group to gather their written input. The desire for a servant pastor was clearly reflected in the input we received from our members. With some humor, our committee took note of the next-most-desired trait, which was usually expressed as “Don’t preach too long, especially when the Cowboys are playing.” After all, traits should represent the reality of the desires of the church.

We also felt that prospective ministers should know something about Southland Baptist Church. We felt that, just as we were looking at résumés and checking references, a candidate should have the same opportunity to know who we are as a church.

Our committee appointed a subcommittee to develop a church profile, which we made available to all prospects. I think that this was one of the most important things that we did. The decision to prepare the profile forced us to confront the issues of *who we are* as a church; *where we are* as a church; and *where we want to go* as a church.

This is a process that churches should be careful not to miss. Developing a church profile will force you to directly confront the question, “*Do we really want a pastor who is a servant leader?*” How you answer that question will, in large measure, determine how you proceed as a committee.

Do Your Homework on Prospective Pastors

Early in the process, I received some good advice from one of the ministers who filled in until we found an interim pastor. He said, “There are a lot of charlatans out there, and they have a well-developed network. They recommend each other and then give glowing recommendations about each other’s work. Be sure you check your prospects out as completely as possible.”

One of the key questions that you need to address as you check out prospects is where a candidate stands on the controversy in the Southern Baptist Convention.

While not infallible, I think that the answer to this question tends to be a reliable indicator of where a person stands on the role of the pastor. Many will be forthright, some will be evasive, and some will claim to be neutral.

If integrity, courage, and leadership are important to a committee, then being neutral is a bad sign. Why would a person with integrity be neutral when good Christian leaders have been savaged and their careers and reputations destroyed?

Foy Valentine, in the March 1994 [Texas Baptists Committed Newsletter](#), said it better than I can when he said, “You must make your own assessment as to whether or not they (candidates) are being candid, telling the truth. That determination can easily be made on the basis of (1) who has recommended the prospect to you; (2) visiting preachers the candidate has recently brought into his/her church; and (3) whether he/she has purchased a bogus doctor’s degree from one of the mail order degree mills.”

If the person making the recommendation is known to be aligned with the group that believes the pastor is the ruler of the church, then I think that a committee that is looking for a servant leader might well see that it is being led in the wrong direction.

Likewise, if the candidate has been bringing guest speakers to his/her church who are strongly identified with the political Fundamentalists, then this is a clear message for the search committee to consider.

The committee should also consider where the prospect has received his/her theological education. If a minister has a degree from an unaccredited diploma mill, that is a red flag that should get everybody’s attention. If you have a question about a particular program or school, contact the Association of Theological Schools, the national accrediting agency for seminaries, in Pittsburgh and check it out (www.ats.edu; 412-788-6505).

I believe that theological education will increasingly be an issue that search committees have to address. I encourage you to support, with prayer and financial aid, Truett Seminary at Baylor, Logsdon School of Theology at Hardin-Simmons, the Carroll Theological Institute, and the Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond. Unless the direction of the Southern Baptist Convention changes, the time will soon come when these schools are the primary sources of new servant leaders in the Baptist clergy.

Other Considerations Are Important

Following are some other indicators of servant leadership to consider and check out:

- Does the candidate treat his church staff with dignity and respect?
- What is the work environment like in the church office?
- How dogmatic is he/she on the “hot button” issues of the day?
 - Abortion
 - Women in ministry
 - AIDS
 - Prayer in school
 - Homosexuality

Firmly held convictions are desirable, so long as there is substantial evidence of respect for, and tolerance of, others’ views and opinions. Is the candidate a person who thinks he/she has all the answers, or does he/she recognize that there are questions in life for which people have no answers? A person who claims to have all the answers should raise a big red flag to a search committee.

- Is there a broad committee structure in place in his/her church?
- Are lay leaders being developed and used in his/her church?

- What is the function of the deacons in the candidate's present church?

Are the deacons servants, or do they function as a super finance committee?

The answers to these questions will tell you a lot about whether a candidate is truly a servant leader. Cecil Sherman recently said, in the *Formations* Sunday School literature, "Not much of consequence happens in a hurry. I see churches seeking to find a preacher who will give them a quick fix. This usually leads to trouble. Churches are fixed when the Spirit of God moves. Waiting on God is not the American way."

Plan Before You Visit Candidates

I think there is a tendency to rush the visitation part of the search process. A lot of preliminary work needs to be done before the committee ever hits the road. Some of that work would include developing the church profile, reviewing résumés, requesting and listening to sermon tapes, checking references, developing and checking additional references, and narrowing the field to include only those candidates to whom you really feel that God is leading you.

All of this takes time, but this time gives the committee a chance to get organized, form bonds of trust, and develop communication within the committee; and for the church to move forward with the grieving process that inevitably follows when a popular pastor leaves.

If the preliminary work is done well, the need to travel will be reduced, as will the expense to the church of the search process. Additionally, most prospects will not be kept waiting in suspense while the committee completes its work. As soon as an individual is no longer under active consideration, the search committee chair should communicate that fact to the candidate.

How the committee conducts visits is an important issue. We felt that unannounced, drop-in visits were generally inappropriate and unproductive. We also felt that only those on our really short list should be visited.

A couple of times, one of our committee members was in the vicinity of a prospect's church and went to hear him preach, but this kind of visit was rare. We normally contacted the minister, told him we planned to visit, and asked to meet and have dinner with him and his wife on a Saturday night. That way, we got to meet and visit with them in an informal setting, and they likewise got to meet and ask questions of the search committee.

We tried to be as candid as possible at these meetings and found that the ministers and their wives were forthright with us. This is the time to really explore the issue of servant leadership and deal with any concerns the committee might have about a prospective minister.

This time of give-and-take is a good time to see whether the chemistry is right between the committee and the candidate. It is also a good opportunity for the minister and his wife to ask hard questions of the search committee. All of this sounds rather mechanical, but I want you to know that all of the members of the Southland search committee would agree that the spiritual dimension of service on a search committee cannot be overemphasized.

Remain Faithful to the Task

We all found the search process to be a time of growth as we worked together and witnessed the mystery of God's leadership. I believe that a search committee must do its work and trust that God will lead them to a servant leader. In the fullness of time, God will lead the committee to the right person. Our task is to be diligent, patient, and discerning enough to recognize and respond to God's leadership.

A friend of mine told me that “an imperfect process done by imperfect people can somehow find God’s perfect will.” That is the challenge that confronts search committees, pastors, and churches.

In 1757, General Edward Braddock led a British army from Virginia into what is now Pennsylvania to drive the French from Fort Pitt. Fort Pitt sits at the point at which the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers come together to form the Ohio River.

It was the key strategic site in the competition between the British and French to control North America, and it is now the site of the city of Pittsburgh.

One of Braddock’s military aides was a young colonial named George Washington. Several miles east of Fort Pitt, the British were surprised by a force of French and Indians and suffered a devastating defeat. Washington had several horses shot out from under him, and General Braddock was fatally wounded as the British and Colonial troops retreated toward Virginia.

Braddock’s last words to Washington were, “We will do it right next time.” Braddock’s last words, “We will do it right next time,” are a terrible epitaph for a military leader and also for a search committee. Search committee members and potential pastors need to be sensitive to God’s direction. If we are, God will see that we do it right the first time.”