

The Candidating Process

by John R. Cionca

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The process of becoming pastor to a congregation is similar to the steps leading up to marriage. At one end of the personal relationship continuum is the becoming acquainted stage; at the other end lies deep awareness and intimacy. The process moves from dating, to going steady, to engagement, to the wedding ceremony, in which the exchanging of vows seals the relationship before God and state.

As a dating couple spends time together and enjoys each other's company more and more, their relationship grows and their thoughts turn to making their relationship permanent. Their chances for a successful marriage, however, depend on the *quality* of their courtship. A rocky dating relationship is seldom followed by a stable marriage, but a courtship characterized by honesty and discovery usually results in a healthy, long-term commitment.

The making of a strong ministry marriage likewise requires relational wisdom. Authenticity and transparency are required of both prospective pastor and congregation. As subsequent conversations deepen knowledge and understanding of one another, they reach the *going steady period*, during which little time and energy are given to any other relationships. Eventually, the church may *pop the big question*, leading to an engagement period called *candidacy*. The marriage of pastor to new congregation is confirmed when both parties say *I do* after the official candidating visit.

Dating: Getting Acquainted

On our first date, Barb and I attended a late-evening movie; on our second date, we attended an Easter sunrise service. Subsequent opportunities to get better acquainted included dinners, school events, carnivals, picnics, sporting events, plays, and numerous church activities. Our relationship developed by being together. It was only later, when Barbara went to college, that writing became our primary mode of communication.

The dating game with pastor and courting congregation, however, almost always begins with a written exchange of information. Before getting serious, both parties need

to get to know each other better. The types of material useful for becoming acquainted include the following:

A mission or purpose statement. What is this church's reason for existing? Are members clear on what they want to accomplish? Have they intentionally thought about ministry direction? A marriage between church and pastor is hard to envision if the congregation is unable to articulate its own goals and objectives. Predicting harmony is much easier when the congregation has worked out its mission and directional thrust for the future.

A self-study or consultant's report. During a pulpit vacancy, many churches survey their members and analyze their ministry. They may either conduct a self-analysis or use an outside resource to help them develop their profile. Reviewing a copy of a self-study can expand a prospective candidate's understanding, and a consultant's report can provide additional objective data.

Pastoral profile and job description. Although commonality exists among pastoral roles, congregations vary on how they weigh specific functions. For this reason, a pastoral profile and job description are essential during the acquaintanceship stage. Is the church looking for primarily a shepherd or an equipper, a generalist or a specialist, a lover or an administrative leader? What proportion of time should be directed toward leadership development, preaching, and caregiving? Contextual variables (size, location, ethnic mix, etc.) temper pastoral priorities.

Doctrinal statement, covenant, affirmations. Obtaining documentation on a church's beliefs and official positions is necessary, even when the minister and the inquiring church are within the same denomination. Congregations rarely experience tension over major doctrines, but battle lines have been drawn over the role of women, the relevancy of charismatic gifts, having divorced persons in leadership, and a number of social justice issues. If the materials from a church do not include statements about such items, requesting them is most appropriate. An early reading on the climate of the church is sometimes possible through these documents.

A history of the church. Most congregations include a historical sketch in the packet of materials sent to pastoral prospects. The history gives the chronological overview of how the church became what it is today. Information selected for inclusion in the history provides insight into what the members prize most highly.

Community demographics. Although some churches provide a detailed study on surrounding neighborhoods, others offer only a general guesstimate. Obviously, the more information a prospect has on age groups, ethnic mix, economic stratification, population densities, traffic patterns, zoning and housing, and employment opportunities in the area, the easier it is to envision ministry possibilities.

Attendance patterns. Statistics on membership totals and attendance for the last ten years are worth requesting if the church has not already provided them. Membership numbers are useful if the method for inclusion is noted, but actual participation in Sunday

school, morning worship, and other programs is of greater benefit. A pastoral candidate's picture of the church is further enhanced by knowing both the median age (mathematical average) and the modal age (largest cluster group) of the parishioners.

A budget history. 'What is the church's average per capita giving? What patterns and trends emerge? How much debt has been encumbered? What percentage of the budget finances that debt? How generous is funding for missions? What other fixed expenses are noted? Since most churches will query candidates on their management of personal finances, requesting a ten-year financial overview is fair turnabout on the minister's part.

Governance structure. Information about a church's method of governing is usually found in its constitution. Procedures for holding office or conducting business are typically delineated. However, although the document usually describes lines of accountability, it rarely details parameters of pastoral authority. Yet, a candidate should know whether he or she can invite a guest to fill the pulpit, for example, or if that would need board approval. The better a prospective pastor understands the church's governance procedures, the clearer he or she can envision potential harmony.

A description of programming for children, youth, and adults. What does church look like to the average attendee? What new programs have been added in the last two years? How centralized or decentralized are the various ministries? Do special emphases and related curricula flow from the church's overall mission? The life of any church goes beyond history, statistics, and community demographics. The focused activity of the congregants tells us much about life within the parish.

A description of facilities. Since the activities in a church are closely linked to the nature of its campus, a description of the physical property provides a context for understanding statistics and programs. The seating capacity of the auditorium, square footage of classrooms, and amount of on-site parking are basic information. The age and condition of buildings is also important to discuss. Weekday use of space gives further detail to one's mental picture of the church's functioning.

Anticipated changes and plans. Knowing a church's past and present is essential. But what does the congregation envision for the future? Does the church anticipate any renovations or expansion projects on their present site? Are the lay leaders considering relocation? Do they have a desire to plant a church? Before a pastor can envision a future with a congregation, he or she needs to know what changes to expect.

Spousal expectations. Many congregants are turned off by a highly visible, assertive pastoral partner, yet they are also disappointed if the spouse is a disengaged nonparticipant in the ministry. Between these extremes, a wide variety of involvement is possible. Seeking clarity on the congregation's view on the role to be played by your husband or wife is a requisite of the acquaintanceship stage.

Enrichment provisions. It is indeed true that *growing churches are pastored by growing ministers*, and staying fresh requires periods of stretching and recharging. While

not appearing demanding, pastoral candidates must ascertain how the church feels about continuing education, participation at denominational meetings, personal involvements with mission trips, vacation time, and other Sundays out of the pulpit. Because no one can meet the needs of the future from past reserves alone, a church's plan for enrichment opportunities is important to know.

Salary range. Far too often, the first inkling a pastor has regarding compensation occurs during the final, official stage of candidating. The Bible commands churches to remunerate their shepherds generously and pastors to care for their family adequately, so it is remiss to accept an invitation to interview, let alone actively candidate, without knowing the salary range for the position. As was mentioned earlier, the precise salary—commensurate with experience and degree of responsibility—is best negotiated after the interview, but a ballpark figure for both salary and benefits should be discussed up front. A healthy relationship maintains openness, including forthrightness regarding compensation.

Pastoral track record. Just as a congregation will ask a prospective pastor to describe previous ministerial employment, so is the pastor free to ask about the church's relationships with previous ministers. Pastoral track records provide insight on how a congregation responds to and cares for its leaders. One pastor suggests asking a predecessor, "What kind of problems did you encounter? What did you seek to do and why? Why did you leave? What kind of pastor do you feel the church needs now and why?" And, "If I were to take this church, what three pieces of advice would you offer?"¹ Although unique factors affect every relationship, congregational past performance paints a picture of what a minister's relationship with the new church might look like.

References. By this time in their dating relationship, both minister and congregation will have exchanged a significant amount of data. *No surprises* has been their mutual goal. But, so far, both parties have presented only their own interpretation of themselves, which may be colored by what they have chosen to disclose. For this reason, congregations typically ask potential candidates for references, even asking those references to suggest other sources to check.

The practice of reference checking is equally wise for the clergy. One colleague suggests that a prospective pastor solicit information from "a neighbor near the church who does not attend, a nearby minister within the same denomination, and two individuals who left the church recently, one happy with the ministry and one unhappy."²

The acquaintanceship stage, during which the prospective pastor and search committee become familiar with one another, can last many months. Usually, the process includes an initial contact, the sending of resume and/or questionnaire, an exchange of information (as outlined earlier), a visit by one or more representatives of the search team, and a conference call with the whole committee and/or church governing board. If both parties believe the pastor/church union has strong possibilities, they will probably agree to enter the next stage in the relationship.

Going Steady: The Interviews

Going steady is a serious matter. Rarely is a ring given in pledge of marriage without careful thought by both parties. An invitation to interview with a church is just as serious. Too often, pastors agree to interview for the purpose of gaining more information, but scheduling an interview should occur only after a healthy exchange of information has left both parties still interested in pursuing the relationship.

The campus visit allows a prospective candidate and a search committee to meet and interact face to face. Issues raised in correspondence and telephone conversations may now be addressed on a more personal level. Full communication, including facial expression and body language, provides needed insight into one another's expectations.

Most ministers stress the importance of interviewing with one's husband or wife present. Unfortunately, churches concerned with expenses may want to invite the spouse only to the candidating event. This arrangement is unacceptable, for it places an inordinate amount of pressure on a marital partner. It is easier for a spouse to say, "Let's not pursue this further" after an interview than to come to that conclusion during the candidating weekend.

Frequently, the best appraisal of a potential ministry match comes from the cleric's partner. Failing to heed a spouse's negative vibes is foolish. One minister shared this illustration:

During the two years we were at the church she never said 'I told you so!' but she might well have. It had happened almost as exactly as she feared. I should have known that my life partner ought to be the one who knew me best. I should have listened more intently to her caring instincts. She, of all people, knew my strengths and weaknesses, and felt from the beginning that this 'new marriage' might be a mismatch. Candidating pastors ought to appreciate their spouse's insights and not reject them lightly as I did. I firmly believe that when God calls, he calls both husband and wife, and there is something amiss if both partners are not hearing the same clear call.³

Since a successful ministry marriage begins with authenticity, during the interview both parties should be as transparent as possible. Overselling or underselling one's qualifications is detrimental. Forthright, precise answers are a must. Career counselors advise never to give an answer that is shorter than twenty seconds or longer than two minutes.... nobody wants to listen to a monologue. People want succinct, quick answers.⁴

A good interview also includes a balance of interchange. Dick Bolles offers this advice:

First, the candidate should talk half of the time about himself and half about the position. If candidates don't talk at all about themselves, people think they're chameleons who are willing to be whatever the parish wants them to be. And nobody wants a chameleon. They want somebody whose behavior they can

predict. The second half of the conversation is about the parish. The successful candidate wants to get the committee to talk. Research has discovered that people most likely to get hired stick to this fifty-fifty ratio talk about the candidate and the church.⁵

What *types of questions do search committees ask*? Denominational executives suggest that search committees ask the following questions:

1. What do you consider your spiritual gifts to be?
2. What aspects of pastoral ministry bring you greatest joy and fulfillment? What aspects of ministry are hardest for you? How do these relate to your strengths and weaknesses?
3. How do you assure a growing personal relationship with Christ? What guidelines have you found helpful in your personal walk with the Lord?
4. Could you tell us the approximate time schedule you would follow in a typical week of ministry at a church?
5. If you became our pastor, what special objectives would occupy you during your first six months?
6. What would people sense about you that would cause them to believe you loved them?
7. Do you consider your formal education complete? If not, what goals do you have for further formal training? Do you have aspirations to write a book?
8. How do you protect yourself from becoming overextended?
9. What is your policy regarding officiating at weddings where divorce is involved?
10. What are your hobbies? Your favorite sports?
11. How does your family contribute to your life and ministry?
12. What is your present salary package?
13. Do you have a philosophy of ministry for the local church? If so, describe it.
14. How do you do the work of an evangelist?
15. How would you assist members of the church to improve their evangelism ministry?
16. How would your pastoral leadership fulfill Jesus' command to make disciples? Are you comfortable in one-on-one situations designed to lead the other person to become a reproducing disciple?

17. How do you feel about small group ministries? What has been your personal involvement?
18. What is your personal practice regarding visitation?
19. How do you prepare the details of a worship service?
20. How do you feel about lay participation in reading, praying, sharing, giving announcements, etc.?
21. To what extent are the worship hours your evangelistic opportunity?
22. How much time do you invest in preparing a thirty-minute sermon?
23. What is your preaching style?
24. How much time do you need to deliver a sermon?
25. How do you envision your role in relation to a missions committee in developing the missionary work of the church?
26. How should a local church fund its missions program?
27. What is your feeling and evaluation of our denomination's missions program?
28. Would you desire to include parachurch groups in the mission work of the church?
29. What strategy do you follow for recruitment of volunteers?
30. How would you interface with the Sunday school, children's church, club programs, youth groups, and weekday preschool?
31. Do you consider yourself well-organized? Illustrate.
32. How would you contribute to the skill-building of the leadership?
33. If you recommended employing a part-time assistant and the board thought that sufficient funds were not available for that purpose, how would you respond?
34. Have you a preference for the single-board structure? Would you feel comfortable under a multiple-board system?
35. What is the nature and scope of the pastor's authority in the church? Please illustrate.
36. Do you have any outstanding financial obligations?
37. What strategies would you suggest for stimulating generosity among congregants?

38. What policies do you follow in personal counseling?

39. What is your premarital counseling requirement?⁶

Hopefully, not all of these questions would be asked at an interview—or little time would remain for the pastor to query the church. Whether a minister proceeds to candidating is, after all, a two-way decision. Therefore, the interview should also provide time for his or her follow-up on information received earlier through correspondence and conversations.

What types of questions should you—as a prospective candidate—ask a search committee? I suggest the following questions:

1. Why are you a member of this church? (Ask each of the members around the room to give a brief response.)
2. Why am I of particular interest to you?
3. What has been the most significant historical event in the life of the congregation? What has been the most notable in the last five years?
4. What are the highest priorities of your church? (Ask each participant to give three top priorities. Addressing priorities identifies not only important ministerial functions but also the amount of agreement among the committee members regarding those expectations.)
5. What was the most surprising fact you learned about the congregation from your self-study? (Again, a circle response will ensure feedback even from the less talkative members of the committee.)
6. Describe what an average week would look like for your next pastor.
7. Are there specific things that pastors should do that laypeople should not do?
8. If you were to rank the items in your doctrinal statement and covenant, what would be your top two? (Again, encourage multiple responses.)
9. What is the consensus level within your church regarding the issues of the role of women, divorced persons in leadership, charismatic gifts, and social issues? (Through earlier communications, a prospective pastor receives the official church policy. But now it is time to probe regarding depth of acceptance of the particular official position. Also inquire about other concerns that are still unresolved in the congregation.)
10. What activities engage the church with the local community? (Asking about immediate neighbors, policies about the use of facilities by outside groups, and local civic concerns reveals attention to outreach versus maintenance.)

11. What is your description of the typical attendee at your church.
12. What is the biggest fiscal challenge at the church? If the church received a gift of \$50,000, how would the congregants want to spend it?
13. What are the parameters for pastoral decision-making? For example, who determines invitations to guest speakers, use of the church buildings by outsiders, or whom the pastor may marry?
14. What types of programs would you like to see started in the next two years? (After a circle response, ask appropriate follow-up questions, such as, *Why haven't they been started already? What might impede them from happening in the future?*)
15. If the congregation were to look in a mirror, what would it see as its strengths and weaknesses?
16. If you could change the church's facility, what would it look like? (During the tour of the campus, a potential candidate can observe repair of facilities, adequacy of heating and cooling systems, size of classrooms, quality of sound system, pleasantness of nursery [cleanliness and quality of toys and cribs, signage, decor of restrooms, manicure of lawns, and functionality of office layout. Probing into how the facilities could be modified reveals how the congregation feels about its facilities.)
17. What would the ideal pastor's spouse at this church look like? With whom might he or she be compared?
18. How should your pastor(s) recharge their batteries? What means of support does the church provide to encourage personal and professional enrichment?
19. What has been the church's practice regarding pastoral salaries and benefits? On what basis have adjustments been made?
20. What has been the procedure to determine the remuneration for this position? With whom will I meet during this visit to talk about the compensation package?
21. Please tell me about the contributions of your last three pastors. What did they do particularly well? What legacy did they leave the church? What areas of greater expertise did they need?

When a couple is going steady, they deepen in mutual understanding and commitment. Sometimes this closeness reveals differences significant enough to merit breaking off the relationship. Most often, however, those who have reached this level of commitment proceed to the altar. Similarly, when pastor and call committee come through the interview process feeling excited about a possible union, it's time to plan a candidating event.

The Engagement Party: Candidating

The candidating experience, much like an engagement party, is a time of confirmation and celebration that usually includes the setting of a wedding date. The pastor being courted will greet scores of people, go through formalities, answer questions, and fellowship around food as a prelude to accepting the church's official proposal. For this reason, pastors should agree to candidate only when they are convinced that, barring some unforeseen circumstances, they would accept a call if it were extended.

The length of the candidating experience/process varies from church to church. Some congregations use an eight-day schedule, allowing two Sundays for preaching and the whole week between for meeting people and exploring the community. Most churches, however, prefer to set aside one long weekend for the experience.

For several reasons, many colleagues recommend a Thursday-through-Monday schedule. First, a proper exchange of information during the previous months reduces the need for vast amounts of discovery. Second, it is fairly easy for pastor and spouse to absent themselves from their present church without raising suspicions. And third, congregational votes tend to be more a show of confidence in the search committee than a decision about the candidate. A typical member will affirm the recommendation of a highly trusted, credible search team but will have doubts about a candidate proposed by a controversial call committee. Unless a candidate self-destructs in their presence, most congregants are ready to affirm the search committee's recommendation after a weekend encounter.

If you have been invited to a candidating event, what should you expect? Getting the feel for the entire congregation, as well as letting them all become acquainted with who you really are, is your focused task for the weekend. While you should avoid putting on airs, you must remember that you will never get a second chance to make a first impression. One colleague asserts, "Upon first meeting you, therefore, they will be looking for those signs and symbols that indicate that you do like them—the way you shake hands, the way you listen to them, the kind of eye contact they have with you, the nonverbal signals you give that indicate your readiness and openness to engage them personally."⁷

Part of being yourself is presenting a candidating message typical of your usual performance. An appropriate message avoids controversial issues or peculiar viewpoints. Instead, it offers solid exposition applicable to a general audience. The sermon should not be unusually creative (i.e., dramatic first person or using PowerPoint, etc.) unless that is your normal practice. The most convincing message is a well-prepared sermon that is a realistic picture of your potential.

As you preach the candidating message, you should also look for information about the parishioners. How attentive is the audience? Are people using their Bibles? Are they taking notes? Do their facial expressions reveal interest? The congregation's involvement with your preaching gives much insight into their spiritual hunger.

The degree of congregational warmth is observable through the atmosphere present during social gatherings. Cues worth noting are the greetings of people, the expression on their faces, the enthusiasm of their singing, and their participation in conversations. The congregation's sense of self-esteem is discernable from the chemistry that exists between its members.

During your interview on campus, you had a chance to see the church's buildings. But now you can get a feel for the adequacy of the facilities. Observing the nursery in operation, the Sunday school class in progress, the traffic flow in the foyer, the capacity of the parking lot, and the attendance in the auditorium is more revealing than mere building diagrams and statistical records.

Sealing the Vows: The Letter of Call

After days of meetings, conversations, and impressions, the congregation (suitor) will vote (pop the question), and you must respond. A pastor who receives less than an 80 percent call may want to reconsider the potential for success with the new church. Better an embarrassing refusal than an ill-fated marriage! Fortunately, this occurrence is rare among those who have exercised wisdom before the candidating event.

On the other hand, a minister who is uncomfortable with less than a unanimous call might be asking too much. Since congregants rarely agree on every parish issue, a unanimous call may even be misleading. A positive call falls between the range of 80 to 100 percent and communicates a basic affirmation that the members are responsive to who you are as a person and will support the ministry into which you will lead them.

Protocol suggests that the chairperson of the search committee notify you in person or by phone immediately after the voting results are tallied. Your response to this unofficial call is likewise unofficial. Formal acceptance is presented to the church in writing, following receipt of the church's official letter of call, which should state all of the specifics of the contractual arrangement (see fig. 6, "Sample Letter of Call," at the end of this chapter). If particulars are not spelled out, or if some of the specifics are different from your prior understanding, those differences should be resolved before sending a letter of acceptance. Follow-through on verbal agreements is difficult with volunteers rotating in and out of leadership, so it is advisable to document arrangements in writing.

A letter of acceptance should include (or verify) the anticipated starting date. Many pastors suggest forty-five to sixty days following the call as the best time to begin the new work. Your present congregation deserves at least thirty days' notice to handle the loss (especially if it is unexpected) and develop plans for the interim. Remaining longer than two months keeps both congregations on hold, draining energy and enthusiasm. A gracious goodbye promotes a healthy closure for your people and releases them to pursue their work of transition (see chap. 16).

Summary

This year, Barbara and I celebrated our forty-second wedding anniversary. I still remember that special day in September when *in the sight of God and company* we began our new life together. The longevity of our marriage not only speaks of God's goodness but also attests that years earlier we had begun a journey that drew us ever closer to each other.

Interestingly, this year also marks our thirty-fifth year of ministry. Over the years we've experienced new beginnings in Colorado, Arizona, New Jersey, and Minnesota. None of our decisions to move was easy, but we made all of them with certainty. The fine ministry relationships we have experienced also speak of God's goodness and the careful courtship process that led us safely to each new destination.

Figure 6

Sample Letter of Call

Dear _____

It is my privilege and joy as chairperson of the Pastoral Search Committee and Church Clerk to write this letter to report to you the positive action of the _____ Church to call you to become our senior pastor.

At the special business meeting held on _____ the church members expressed their appreciation of your ministry with us and voted to extend a call to you to become our pastor. The vote was as follows:

_____ Affirmative _____ Negative

We promise you our unified support, encouragement, and positive obedience in the Lord. We promise and commit ourselves to the following compensation arrangements so you may fully devote yourself to lead us in ministry and outreach in our community.

1. Salary:

\$ _____ per year. To be paid:

\$ _____ monthly; \$ _____ biweekly; \$ _____ weekly

2. Housing:

Parsonage: _____; or,

Housing allowance: _____

Utilities: _____; or,

Utility allowance: _____

3. Insurance:

Medical: _____; Dental: _____; Retirement: _____

Life: _____; Disability: _____; Other: _____

4. Business Expense:
- Car allowance: \$ _____
- Continuing education: \$ _____
- Books and periodicals: \$ _____
- Association meetings: \$ _____
5. Vacation:
- Annual: _____ weeks
- Special meetings: _____
- Study leaves: _____
- Days off per week: _____
- Sick leave/days per month: _____
6. Moving Expense: \$ _____

We further promise you our prayer support, acceptance of your leadership, and openness to the needs that may arise as you serve the Lord with us.

In anticipation of your positive response,

Chairperson

Church Clerk

Pastoral Search Committee
of _____ Church⁸

End Notes Chapter 14: The Candidating Process

1. Kenneth Quick, "Candid Candidating," *Leadership Journal* (fall 1990): 72.
2. Ibid, 73.
3. David B. Biebel and Howard W. Lawrence, eds., *Pastors Are People Too* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1986), 62.
4. Richard Nelson Bolles, "The Pastor's Parachute," *Leadership Journal* (summer 1990): 23.
5. Ibid, 23.
6. Dennis Newton Baker, "A Pastoral Search Manual for the Conservative Baptist Association of Southern California" (D.Min. diss., Talbot School of Theology, 1992), 93.
7. Roy M. Oswald, *New Beginnings* (Washington, DC: Alban Institute, 1989), 26–27.
8. Used by Permission of Dennis N. Baker