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IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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What Do People Want in Their Pastors?

Jed Smith agreed to chair yet another pastoral search committee—for the second time in just five years. Margaret, another active member, buttonholed Jed after church: “I didn’t like the last pastor you helped us hire. I hope you do a better job this time!”

Jed wisely responded, “Well, I didn’t like the pastor before this one that you liked. But we both kept coming to church!”

Margaret and Jed want the same thing—a pastor who is a good match for the congregation. How do they find the right pastor?

After interviewing dozens of church people who chaired or served on pastoral search or staff-parish relations committees, Adair Lummis* concludes that all members want the same qualities in their next pastor—at least they *say* the same things. But what they *don’t* say—what Lummis calls “secondary expectations”—matter most.

Members create a “must have” clergy qualities list just as homebuyers initially give their realtor a “must have” list. However, after seeing several houses, many people realize they were completely wrong about what they *said* they wanted. Thus, the real estate maxim, “Buyers are liars.” Like real estate brokers, the lay leadership must understand what the congregation’s members really want in order to help them get it. While that might sound easy, it is not.

What Qualities Make the Good Pastor List?

“Primary expectations” are the qualities and abilities that all congregants say they value in a pastor:

1. Good preacher and worship leader. Unfortunately, these qualities mean different things to different members. The search committee should ask members to define a “good sermon.” Does it make you think, engage your mind, and reflect sound scholarship? Or does a good sermon help you feel God’s presence? Is a good sermon filled with inspirational stories?

2. Strong spiritual leader. What qualifies as spiritual strength in one congregation would not make that cut in another. In one congregation, the number of hours per week that the pastor spends in congregational work is seen as directly proportional to his or her spiritual depth. In another

setting, people define the warm and caring pastor with few outside interests as spiritually mature. In still another congregation people relate spiritual strength to personal conduct, exemplary character, and clarity about God’s call to ministry.

3. Good people skills. Members want a pastor with keen social skills. They like someone with a sense of humor, who is not too introverted but not too extroverted, either. Members want the pastor to set (and publish) regular office hours so they know when they can talk with him or her.

4. Experienced. Many congregations want a young pastor *and* someone with experience. Younger candidates often don’t have much experience, while experienced candidates are typically older.

Another wrinkle in the age-experience dilemma: more seminary graduates are now second-career pastors. They have *life* experience but possess little pastoral experience.



SOME SEARCH COMMITTEES ARE BETTER AT DISGUIISING THEIR UNSPOKEN EXPECTATIONS THAN OTHERS.

5. *Administrative competence.* This skill is hard to pin down because few members interact with or see the pastor outside worship services. Is the candidate competent at organizing people for ministries, remembering administrative details, chairing meetings, and handling conflict?

6. *Religious authenticity.* While their descriptive words differ, most members feel they know an authentic pastor when they see one. But they also rely on denominational gatekeepers—seminary, judicatory, and ordination requirements—to recommend pastors with a clear call to ministry and screen out questionable candidates.

What Qualities Appear on the Invisible List?

“Secondary expectations” can tip the balance toward one candidate over another. Unspoken expectations can prevent potential candidates from ever getting an interview. What are those invisible qualities and attributes that matter to lay people—factors that they don’t say are important, but are?

1. *Recent-past experiences.* Lummis found that church people want to either “clone or demonize” the previous pastor, or even the previous two pastors. The previous pastor’s poor health surfaced in many interviews as a reason the committee was searching for a younger pastor.

If the previous pastor served a long time—fifteen years or more—the committee may simply seek a change. They may expect their next pastor to stay fewer than ten years.

The reverse is also true. A congregation with several short pastorates may search for someone who will put down roots. If the last pastor was a woman, the search committee may want a male pastor. Some committees see this as “taking turns”—“we had a female pastor last time.” Congregations served by a retiring pastor (in his or her last pastorate) may seek a new pastor under age fifty-five.

2. *Age.* While the average pastor is thirty-two years old at ordination, the average age of pastors currently serving congregations is fifty-two. If forced to choose between a younger candidate and one with experience, the majority of congregations choose the younger pastor.

3. *Chaplain for a few.* The search committee may focus on finding a minister for the loyal, long-time church members. Those members may not want to attract new members or start new programs. The church may even have specific members that the committee knows *must* be happy about who they select. The committee’s co-dependency with these members makes the committee unaware that it lives by the saying, “If Mama ain’t happy, ain’t nobody happy.”

4. *Cultural fit.* Some congregations sense that they’re not ready for a female or a racial-ethnic minority pastor. Or they feel that “settling” for female or minority leadership

reflects poorly on their ability to attract the “best” pastors. In denominations that ordain women, about half of the seminary students are now women. While the number of minority seminary students remains small, the percentages continue to increase. Current trends indicate that search committees will wrestle with these choices sooner rather than later.

5. *Marriage and family.* Search committees can confuse the “spiritual ideal of the nuclear family” with real pastoral qualities. Sometimes, parishioners have an unspoken preference for a happily married male with a wife who does not work outside the home. She also volunteers at the church while raising “wholesome and polite children.”

The nuclear family preference discriminates against single pastors (now one-third of seminary students), females (even if they’re married), a male minister whose wife pastors another church, and co-pastors. Search committees sometimes use code language—“we want a biblical preacher”—to convey their unspoken preference for pastors that match the congregation’s theological and religious views.

The Bottom Line

Despite its challenges, calling a new pastor presents an opportunity to change the congregation’s climate and direction. Ask the search committee to discuss the items above and identify which ones matter to members. Evaluate the rationale behind the congregation’s desires. Do those wishes reflect congregational health and a future-focus?

Some of the questions committees often fail to discuss:

1. Can our pastor have a new vision for the congregation, or will some of our people interpret that new vision as an inappropriate agenda?

2. Do we want our pastor to motivate, organize, and equip us for ministries, or do we want a hired hand who does all of the ministries for us?

3. What could our congregation’s ministries be like in five years? What kind of leader could take us there?

4. Given God’s record of calling unlikely candidates to do great ministry, are our hearts open to the person God might call to lead us?

* Adair T. Lummis, “What Do Lay People Want in Pastors? Answers from Lay Search Committee Chairs and Regional Judicatory Leaders,” *Pulpit & Pew Reports*, Spring 2003 (www.pulpitandpew.duke.edu).