

An Open Letter to Pastor Search Committees

From Virginia Baptists Committed

So you have been elected to serve on your church's Pastor Search Committee. Congratulations! Your selection indicates that the members of your congregation believe you have the spiritual maturity to discern the person God is calling to serve as your church's next pastor. We don't know exactly who you should call as pastor, but perhaps we can offer some helpful advice, based on our knowledge of and experience in a variety of Virginia Baptist churches.

First, start your search process with sincere prayers that God will guide you to the person He wants to lead your church as pastor. The best "process" of searching will not lead to a good result unless you and the other members of your committee are regularly praying and listening for God's guidance in this important task.

When your committee meets for the first time, make sure you get to know one another. If you serve in a small church, you may already know each other quite well. But in larger churches committee members may not even know each other's names at first. It will be important for all of you to develop a sense of mutual trust and respect if you are to function effectively as a committee. Members will need to be able to share their dreams, ask tough questions, disagree respectfully, and make sure that every member has a genuine opportunity to participate in the process.

Before you begin to look for a pastor, you need to decide what criteria your committee will be looking for in a prospective candidate. Many committees take a survey of the congregation to see what qualities the members consider most important in a new pastor. Other committees feel confident that their members represent the variety of views within the congregation and thus do not need to conduct a survey. In that case, the committee might survey its own members. Whatever type of survey is conducted, be sure to address the following areas:

1. Personal Faith in Christ and Theology
2. Education
3. Experience
4. Pastoral Abilities
5. Worship Style
6. Understanding of Church Polity
7. Denominational Relations

Each of these are discussed below:

1. Personal Faith in Christ and Theology

Your committee will obviously want to find candidates who have a strong personal faith in Christ and can freely share a testimony about their decision to accept Christ as Lord and Savior, their growth as a Christian, and their call to the ministry. Churches will differ on the exact shade of theology that they would prefer in a pastor. Very few Baptist General Association of Virginia (BGAV) churches are looking for a pastor who is theologically a liberal or fundamentalist. If we can imagine a scale from 1-10, with 1 being extremely liberal (or skeptical) and 10 being fundamentalist, most BGAV churches probably range from 5-8 on the scale. You may decide you want a pastor who is more moderate (5-6 on the scale) or more conservative (7 or 8). Of course, these numbers are only an approximation of someone's true theology. To dig deeper, you will need to consider questions such as the following:

- What do you believe about Jesus Christ (humanity and divinity)?
- Tell us your understanding of human sin.
- What does a person need to do receive salvation?
- Explain your understanding of the inspiration and authority of the Bible.
- What do you believe about miracles like the Incarnation and Resurrection?
- Tell us about the significance of Christ's Crucifixion.
- What do you believe about the Holy Spirit?
- What ministries should be open to women? Which, if any, should not? What is your opinion about women deacons?

2. Education

What level of education would you consider a minimum for your pastor? What level of education would you prefer? Make sure any candidate only presents degrees from schools accredited by ATS (the Association of Theological Schools). Non-accredited degrees are much easier to get but demonstrate very little academic ability. Honorary degrees (such as the D. D.) are usually given for practical achievement but require no academic work. Here is a listing of post-high school degrees by rank:

- **Ph.D./Th.D.** — This is the highest academic Doctoral degree possible. It is primarily a research degree.
- **Th.M.** — The top academic Masters degree.

- **D. Min.** — A very practical Doctoral degree designed to help a pastor apply academic knowledge to local church ministry.
- **M. Div.** — The standard Masters degree from seminary or divinity school.
- **M.R.E./M.C.E.** — These Masters degrees emphasize religious education over theology.
- **B.A./B. S.** — A standard college Bachelors degree.
- **A. A.**— A two-year college degree.

The particular school a minister attended is often very important. BGAV churches used to call the great majority of their pastors from three SBC seminaries—Southern, Southeastern, and Southwestern. Since the fundamental wing of the SBC has taken control of all SBC seminaries in the mid-1990s, many BGAV churches are more cautious about calling ministers who have recently graduated from these schools. Some of their graduates still make excellent pastors. Others will want any church they pastor to become fundamentalist and leave the BGAV. Your committee will need to ask questions carefully if you don't want to have this happen to your church. New seminaries have been started by moderate and conservative (non-fundamental) Baptists over the past decade. Two of these are located in Virginia: the Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond (BTSR) and the John Leland Center for Theological Studies in northern Virginia. Other new seminaries have been started in North Carolina, Georgia, Texas and other states. You can get names of prospective candidates from BTSR and Leland at the following email addresses and phone numbers:

BTSR btsr@btsr.edu 804-355-8135
 Leland johnlelandcenter.edu 703-538-6411

3. Experience

What is the minimum amount of experience you would consider in a prospective pastor? How much would be ideal? Remember to consider the quality of the pastor's experience in addition to the total number of years served. Some pastors simply list their church name and number of years served on a résumé. For example, "First Baptist Church, Pastor, 1992-2002." Ten years experience may sound impressive but you can't tell much from this simple entry. Some pastors accomplish a lot in ten years. Others leave a church substantially weaker than they found it. The strongest résumés list several significant accomplishments during a pastor's tenure. Consider the following hypothetical résumé entry:

First Baptist Church, Pastor, 1997-2002. Under my leadership First Baptist added a contemporary worship service, increased Sunday School and worship attendance by 40%, led 18 unchurched people to Christ, expanded the church staff, built a new Fellowship Hall, and took in its first four black members in the church's history.

This entry allows a Search Committee to look for accomplishments that may indicate a pastor has the gifts they are seeking.

A related factor to experience is the pastor's age. Search Committees that believe their church has been stagnant often look for a young pastor to provide enthusiastic leadership. Churches that have been through troubled times often search for an older pastor to provide stability. Some Search Committees set rigid limits for age, eliminating all candidates that are not 35-50, for example. A better course might be to favor a particular age range but not automatically eliminate candidates who fall just outside that range. Some older pastors still have lots of energy and some young pastors have already demonstrated maturity and wisdom. Look for the particular qualities you want rather than making age an absolute criterion.

4. Pastoral Abilities

When they begin, many committees try to accommodate everyone's preferences and find a candidate who demonstrates outstanding abilities in almost every area of ministry. This is an impossible task! Some ministers, especially those in smaller churches, have developed a basic competence in many areas of ministry. Other ministers, more often those in larger churches, have developed one or two ministry skills to an outstanding level. But no pastor is outstanding in a dozen different ministry areas.

A more realistic approach is to identify two or three areas of ministry in which you really want the pastor to excel, and perhaps two or three others where you need basic competence. Make sure your congregation knows that lay leaders and/or associate ministers will have to take the lead in performing other ministries. Some of the most common areas of ministry that pastors are asked to perform include: *Preaching — Worship Design — Teaching — Evangelism & Outreach — Pastoral Care & Visitation — Volunteer Recruitment — Leadership of Church Staff — Counseling — Community Leadership — Denominational Leadership — Reaching Young Families — Leadership of Lay People.*

5. Worship Style

Nationwide changes in worship style have caused huge conflicts in many of our churches. It is very important to ask candidates what type or types of worship they prefer. If your members generally agree on the worship style they prefer, make that a criteria by which you choose candidates. If your congregation is in conflict about your current worship style or regarding the possibility of launching a second worship service with a different style, then please come to some resolution before you call a pastor.

Virginia Baptist churches generally offer worship in one of five distinct styles. At the risk of oversimplifying, we have listed them below with their most obvious characteristics:

- **Liturgical/Formal** — ministers in robes, organ, Lectionary readings, “Church Year” emphasis
- **Traditional** — robed choir, hymns, wide range of music, little overt emotion
- **Revivalist** — strongly evangelistic, overtly emotional, energetic preaching
- **Praise and Worship/Contemporary** — casual clothing, Praise Team, Praise Choruses, Band, Conversational sermon, lots of singing
- **Seeker** — Like a “Praise and Worship” service but less singing, everything aimed at “seekers,” sermon starts with “felt needs” of nonbelievers

Paul Basden’s book, *The Worship Maze: Finding a Style to Fit Your Church*, can provide an excellent overview of the subject, along with wise counsel for congregations struggling with this potentially divisive issue.

6. Understanding of Church Polity

Different understandings of church polity (how churches are governed) lead to many conflicts between pastors and their churches. It is not adequate for committees and candidates just to quickly agree that the pastor will “lead without being a dictator.” The issue must be explored more thoroughly than that.

First, the committee should ask the candidate’s views on pastoral authority. Those views should be given in great detail and illustrated with specific examples of the way that authority was exercised. Note that many candidates from a fundamentalist background believe that the pastor is to exercise his authority as “ruler” of the church. In reaction against that, some candidates from a “moderate” background exhibit a very passive leadership style. What kind of leader does your congregation need? Ask questions like these to determine the candidate’s leadership style:

- How much influence should the pastor have in election of deacons?
- How much influence should the pastor have in election of committee leaders?
- How much influence should the pastor have in the formation of a budget?
- How much influence should the pastor have in calling new staff ministers, managing them, and firing them, if necessary? Does the pastor, Personnel Committee, or congregation in business meeting have final say?
- Can the pastor make significant changes to worship without congregational approval?
- What group evaluates the pastor’s performance each year? How and when will the evaluation be conducted?

The committee should also give an honest description of their church’s polity to the candidate. Do the deacons function as a board of elders, making key business decisions, or are they primarily a ministry group? What committees are considered the “power committees”? Are most of the people, who wield genuine power, in key church positions or do they function outside the official positions listed in the constitution? Be honest with your pastoral candidate and insist that the candidate be honest with you about the important issue of pastoral authority.

Denominational Relations

No doubt you have heard something about the “Baptist Battles” of the past quarter century. Many Virginia Baptists have been unhappy with the “Fundamentalist takeover” in the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). Some who like the changes call it a “Conservative Resurgence.” It is important for your committee to remember that each Baptist church is autonomous. That is, it makes its own decisions. You don’t have to take orders from the SBC leaders (or CBF leaders or from us either)! Make sure your congregation has clearly decided which Baptist organizations it wants to be affiliated with. You can have dual affiliations if you want. Most Virginia Baptist churches are affiliated with three or more of these six Baptist organizations:

National Organizations

- Southern Baptist Convention (SBC)—includes moderates, conservatives, and fundamentalists but controlled by the fundamental wing.
- Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF)—includes moderates, conservatives and a few liberals.

State Organizations

- Baptist General Association of Virginia (BGAV)—includes moderates, conservatives, and a very few fundamentalists and liberals.
- Southern Baptist Conservatives of Virginia (SBCV)—includes fundamentalists and conservatives but leans fundamentalist.
- Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Virginia (CBFV)—supports the national CBF organization, member churches are virtually all in the BGAV.

Local Organizations — Your local Baptist Association—you know it better than we do.

Be sure to ask candidates what affiliations they favor and which ones they could live with. Press hard on this issue if candidates seem

evasive. If your church wants to add a new affiliation or change affiliations, choose a candidate who will gladly help you do that. If you don't want to make a change, make sure to choose a candidate who will gladly retain the affiliations you already have. Be wary of candidates who profess to be completely "neutral." Very few thinking Baptists are completely neutral about the tremendous conflicts Baptists have undergone since 1979. If a candidate says, "I have mixed feelings about that organization," ask the candidate to elaborate. What do you like about that organization and what don't you like?

If you want help in gathering résumés of candidates, the Virginia Baptist Mission Board will be glad to provide it. Call 800-255-2428, or email judy.lee@vbmb.org, and ask for help from the resource person in the office of the Empowering Leaders Team.

If your church would like help from the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, there are two resources available to you. You may contact Harvey Skinner of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Virginia at 804-415-1294 or hskinner05@cbfv.org. You may also contact Clarissa Strickland at the national CBF office in Atlanta, 770-220-1600 or cstrickland@thefellowship.info.



Treating Candidates with Common Courtesy

Search Committees always intend to treat candidates in a Christian manner, but frequently that does not happen. Make sure your committee has someone who can provide the secretarial support necessary to contact the candidates in a timely manner. Jesus' saying, "*Do unto others as you would have others do unto you,*" is a good general guide to follow. Here are some specific applications of that general rule:

- Contact ministers at home, not at their churches. Contacting them at their churches can easily create suspicion.
- When a minister sends a résumé, send a brief note to confirm its arrival.
- When contacting references, do not contact anyone from a candidate's present church without his or her explicit permission.
- If you want to hear a candidate preach, it is best to notify the candidate ahead of time. This will prevent your committee members from making a trip only to discover that the minister is not preaching that Sunday or that you have inadvertently chosen a non-typical Sunday to visit. If your committee insists that they want to hear the candidate without the minister knowing exactly when they will arrive, tell the candidate that members of your committee will be visiting on one Sunday in a particular four-week period and ask if those Sundays are acceptable.
- When you visit the candidate's church, be very careful to avoid giving yourselves away. Never visit in a church van with your church's name on the side. Arrive in groups of two or four at the most and do not sit together in worship. In smaller churches, any more than two new visitors on a Sunday may arouse suspicion.
- As soon as a candidate has been eliminated from consideration, let the minister know. It is fine to keep a "second tier" of candidates under consideration while you closely examine a "first tier" group. But let all those who did not make the "second tier" know they are no longer under consideration and let the "second tier" group know approximately when they should expect to hear from you again. Giving ministers the impression that they are still under consideration when the committee is no longer seriously considering them is very unfair.
- Make your "rejection" letters or calls as gentle as possible, but also be quite clear that the candidate is no longer under consideration.
- Top candidates who are not chosen deserve a personal call to let them know that your committee has chosen a different minister. Affirm the ministerial candidates' gifts but clearly tell them what the committee has decided.



References

Be sure to call the references that a candidate gives you and ask questions covering the seven areas outlined above. Encourage the references to give candid answers by promising that their remarks will be held in confidence. If the candidate has neglected to give at least one reference for each position recently held, ask for a reference associated with that position. For top candidates, you might want to ask the references for names and phone numbers of a few other people who can fairly evaluate the candidate. Never call a pastor without thoroughly checking references.



God bless you as you search for the minister God wants your church to call as pastor. Making the right decision can bless your church for decades to come.