

Our Pastor is leaving...

...what will we do?

THE PASTORAL SEARCH AND CALL PROCESS IN THE PRAIRIE ASSOCIATION, UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

Summary

Times of pastoral transition are stressful and exciting! Whether we are grieved to see the pastor leave or are relieved, there is an inevitable sense of anticipation and anxiety about the process which will lead to the calling of a new pastor.

In traditions more connecional than ours, a bishop or other denominational official chooses the church's next pastor. At the other extreme, in non-denominational churches, the process for calling a new pastor can be chaotic and fraught with potential difficulty. Though our system is not perfect, it is designed to respect congregational autonomy while offering the advantage of structure that has been learned in the context of broad church experience. The result, hopefully, is open, fair and thorough.

Outline of the pastoral search process

- When the pastor resigns, it is important to be in contact with the Prairie Association office. The association minister should be invited to a meeting with the Church Council (or similar governing body) to talk about three important issues: saying goodbye to the departing pastor in a healthy way, how to provide pastoral leadership during the interim period, and how to select an effective Pastoral Search Committee.
- Typically the Church Council identifies and hires the interim minister.
- After the Search Committee has been appointed/elected (the process is not the same in all churches), their first task will be to meet with the association minister for training. He will give them an overview of the entire search and call process and help them get started with their work.

- The Search Committee's first task will be to create a "Congregational Profile." This multi-page document describes the congregation, your community, and the kind of pastoral leader your church hopes to call. This document becomes your committee's primary "marketing" tool.
- When the profile is complete, the committee will again meet with the association minister, who will provide specific training in reading candidate profiles (the UCC equivalent of an "annotated resume"), and resources for interviewing, reference checking, and decision-making.
- At this point, the association minister will advertise your pastoral position on the association's website (www.praireforce.org) and in "United Church Employment Opportunities," a national publication of the denomination which is read by clergy considering a new call. The profiles of ALL pastors who ask to be considered by your church will be forwarded to your search committee. The association minister does not screen these profiles (that is, he never withholds a profile, though he does read them). In a very few cases he will offer additional information which he may believe the committee would want to know.
- At the same time, the association minister is monitoring a monthly list of all UCC ministers who have just updated their profiles. These, obviously, are persons who may be newly considering a change of call. Any person whose interests seem at all compatible will be sent introductory information about your church and asked to allow their profile to be sent to you.
- Your committee will conduct telephone interviews with some of these persons and will eventually conduct face-to-face interviews with those to whom they are particularly attracted. When they have selected their one final candidate, that person will be submitted to you as their recommended candidate. You will meet that person during a weekend visit and after participating in worship with that person leading, you will vote "yes" or "no" on the committee's recommendation to call that person as your next pastor.

Other questions

Q: Can we consider candidates from outside the United Church of Christ?

A: Yes, but please use much caution. There is a process by which pastors from denominations with which we have formal partnerships (Christian Church/Disciples of Christ, the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and the Reformed Church in

America) can submit their credentials through the process described above. In reality, both UCC and non-UCC candidates may approach your committee directly. That approach may be innocent, or it may be because the person is seeking to escape pending difficulties and/or discipline in their present place, and would rather your committee not learn about those facts (which would certainly happen if they used the established channels). Your committee is STRONGLY counseled to refer all such persons to the association office. If their candidacy is legitimate, they will be counseled on how to present their credentials to your committee.

Q: Can we vote on more than one candidate?

A: Part of the reason that search committees work so hard to achieve consensus around ONE candidate is to avoid the potentially divisive situation of splitting a congregation between two attractive candidates. Choose the very best people to serve on your search committee—people you trust to present a candidate who will offer the kind of leadership your church needs and will respect. Remember: in a sense, the vote to elect a new pastor is more a vote on your trust of the committee than it is a vote about the candidate, about whom the church as yet knows very little!

Q: What if we can't afford a full-time pastor?

A: You are not alone! About 1/3 of our 44 association churches have pastors who are less than full-time, or who serve more than one church. The resources of the association will help you find pastoral leadership in a form appropriate to your situation.

Q: Who should we select to be on our Search Committee?

A: First of all, don't ask for volunteers! Such persons often have a particular agenda and don't always make the best committee members. The selection of search committee members should be a careful, prayerful, deliberate process in which the church identifies its most faithful, diligent, relationally-skilled members to search on its behalf. Identify your most committed and insightful members and then recruit them to serve in this very important capacity.

Q: Why does it cost so much to employ a pastor?

A: The compensation of pastoral leadership is very much a matter of perspective. Many church members are inclined to compare the pastor's salary with their own. This may not, however, be the best way to evaluate pastoral compensation. Remember, ordained pastors have obtained a minimum of seven years of higher education. To be

ordained, a pastor must earn a bachelor's degree at a college or university, and then earn a Master of Divinity at a theological graduate school or seminary, a process which requires three additional years of full-time study. In the process, the aspiring pastor invests many thousands of dollars and sometimes accumulates tens of thousands of dollars of debt. At the end of this period of study, the newly ordained pastor enters a profession which pays less, often MUCH less, than almost any other profession requiring a similar level of education. It is also important to remember that when a pastor's compensation is reported in a church budget, many eyes travel to the "bottom line," the total cost of employing the pastor. But in most cases, that number includes thousands of dollars of benefits, especially for retirement and insurance, which are not included in the basic salary of other employees. Many (though admittedly not all) other employees also receive significant benefits from their employers, but seldom do those employees ever see that actual cost to their employer of those benefits. Finally, though good pastors do not enter this calling to "get rich" (and none do!), common decency suggests that pastors should be compensated at a level which allows them to comfortably support themselves and their family, and to enjoy a lifestyle similar to those in the church who have similar education and responsibilities.

While this search process is somewhat similar to that in a secular organization, it has one fundamentally different component. This process needs to be explicitly and overtly spiritual. The committee needs to be composed of people who are sensitive to the leading of God, and who will not be shy to pray with each other and disagree with each other (in love and respect). Only then can the committee truly ascertain God's leading.

Ultimately, it is your search committee which will choose your next pastor. The association minister is always available to consult with your committee, but she will not make the decision for them. To the extent she is asked, she will offer counsel and even her opinion. She will assuredly be praying for your church and the search committee during this time of transition. Please remember that her availability is one of the advantages of your wider church connection and covenant. Her availability is made possible by the OCWM (Our Church's Wider Mission) donations of churches like yours throughout the Illinois Conference, UCC.

God bless you as you embark on this exciting, spiritual journey!

<p style="text-align: center;">Prairie Association UCC</p> <p style="text-align: center;">617 N. First St., DeKalb, IL 60115-3199</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Rev. Kathy Lawes, Acting Association Minister</p> <p style="text-align: center;">815-758-3497 kalawes@prairieucc.org</p>
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