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Healthy pastor search process should take inward look as well

By Mark Wingfield
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Somewhere in his 33 years of helping churches find pastors, Vaughn Manning recalls members of a search committee coming to him after the pastor they had recommended was hired but soon washed out.



"We don't understand what went wrong," the committee members told him. "This man fit our profile to a T, and it didn't work."

Manning asked the committee members how they had built their profile. "On what everybody said they wanted," the committee replied.

That was exactly the problem, Manning told them. "What they wanted turned out to be not what they needed."

This is one of the most common pitfalls of pastor search committees, said Manning, a former Texas pastor and director of missions who now serves as a facilitator through the Baptist General Convention of Texas' minister-church relations office.

Manning also is author of a workbook for pastor search committees titled "A Better Way," published by the BGCT.

While it is imperative for a pastor search committee to seek input from the congregation, it is equally imperative to ask the right questions, Manning said.

The best questions get at what a church needs rather than what individual members of the church want, he explained.

It often is difficult for pastor search committees to acknowledge where their church stands on certain issues, what their vision is for ministry and what they want to accomplish, added Gary Loudermilk, a former Texas pastor who now is director of missions for Denton Baptist Association.

"The pastor search committee may be a very knowledgeable group, and as a group they hold certain values and desires. But those are not necessarily the values and vision of the church as a whole," he explained.

In some cases, the best way to address this problem is through the intentional interim process, a relatively new program facilitated by the BGCT. In an intentional interim, a trained interim pastor leads the church to understand its history, examine its leadership and organizational needs, clarify its denominational linkage, develop an identity and vision, and commit to new leadership.

While the intentional interim is highly recommended for churches in conflict and churches that have just concluded a long-tenured pastorate, the process can be effective for any church, said Larry Johnson, director of missions for Ellis Baptist Association.

He almost always recommends the intentional interim process to churches seeking new pastors, he said. "It has the potential for really helping churches get the right person after they deal with some of the issues they are currently facing."

Whether through the intentional interim or some other process, churches between pastors need to take enough time to allow for a healthy transition, Manning added.

Regardless of whether the previous pastorate was stormy or calm, "the people need time to get past that image so they can objectively look at the next pastor," he said. "I don't think any church can successfully transition pastors in less than eight to 12 months. They've got to get past the image of that last pastor before they can be ready to connect with the next one."

Every pastor search committee will hear from members of the congregation who want to hurry along the process, Manning acknowledged. But committees should not bow to that pressure or make a quick decision just because they're tired, he said.

Finding a pastor may not be the most important task done by the pastor search committee, Manning said.

That's a primary emphasis of his workbook for search committees. On its opening page, he notes that someone once observed, "Most churches are looking for a pastor to come and tell them who they are."

But if the church is not clear about its identity, mission and direction, "its relationship with a new pastor could be disastrous," Manning warns in the book.

That advice is echoed by Jan Daehnert, director of the BGCT's minister-church relations office.

Many churches "do not know who they are," he affirmed. "And in many cases, they have changed. Different generations are making different demands. ... Churches do not realize what pressure that puts on them to find the right person."