

Choosing Your Next Clergy Leader

Dan Hotchkiss, Alban Senior Consultant

The most frequent mistake clergy search committees make is to focus too much on the perceived weaknesses of the previous clergyperson. If the predecessor was personable but poorly educated, the search committee scours the world for a Ph.D. and takes social skills for granted—after all, doesn't every minister have them? If the last minister was an active organizational leader but an indifferent preacher, the next will spend most of the work week writing sermons and assume the laity will run the church. The trouble with this approach is that congregations are organized around the strengths of previous clergy more than their weaknesses.

A congregation seeking a new clergy leader is like a person in good health with an itch—oblivious to the health, preoccupied with the itch. Usually a person in that situation is more strongly motivated to scratch the itch than to investigate and build on the sources of the health, even though that would likely lead to greater comfort in the long run. Likewise, when a search committee's top priority is to obtain a candidate who is strong where his or her predecessor was perceived to be weak, it may set that person up to fail in an area of great importance to the congregation.

The second most frequent mistake search committees make is to focus too much on the *strengths* of the departing clergyperson. They say, "We want someone just like Dr. Smith, only younger." This mistake may be even more hazardous for the next ministry, because the role of "younger Dr. Smith" is hard to sustain for long.

In both of these scenarios, the search process is too reactive: it is driven by the congregation's reactions (positive or negative) to past ministers rather than to signs, evidence, and spiritual leadings about leadership the congregation will need in the future. Reactivity is apt to be highest when the prior ministry ended painfully. After a long ministry, a congregation may form camps: one anxious to hold on to what they valued in the former minister, the other eager finally to move forward in directions the departing leader did not allow.

Some reactivity is almost always present, especially at the beginning of a clergy transition. The single most important thing congregations can do in this situation is to engage an effective interim minister for a fixed term. A fixed term enables the leaders to create a plan for the transition and then carry the plan through. Generally this requires at least a year. When the congregation is divided, two years may make it possible to do substantial interim work before the search committee is selected so that the selection will not reflect divisions over the past clergyperson.

The best interim ministers are those who feel a special calling to this work and have prepared for it through training, reading, and experience. They project a sense of urgency to take full advantage of the opportunities the interim year offers, and calm confidence that even a painful transition can be positive. No simple rules ("Never change the liturgy!" "Always shake things up!" "Keep the previous pastor at a distance!") can capture the complexity of a moment of transition; interims need to be able to size up the unique features of a given state of affairs and tailor their approach to the congregation's needs.

Over the course of an interim year or two, members of the congregation name and work through

their reactive feelings about the prior pastor, or occasionally about one who left long ago. Not everyone moves through the transition at the same pace: the search committee leads until they are clear about the kind of clergy leader who will serve the congregation not by healing wounds or assuaging grief over the past but by helping the congregation to fulfill its calling in the future.