# Chapter 8: The Pastoral Candidate Visit and Interview

Preparation: information, format, plan, evaluation -- Conducting the interview -- Follow-up -- Discernment/Decision

For all parties, a great deal rides on the encounter between the pastoral candidate(s) and the Call Committee. Careful attention should be given to thorough preparation and exchange of information ahead of time, wise use of time during the visit, and carefully considered decision- making following the visit. This chapter is divided into those three periods –(1) preparation;

* + 1. the visit; and (3) the decision.

#### PREPARATION FOR THE VISIT

* 1. **Exchange of information**. Determine what information you want from the pastoral candidates, and what information you want to send to them. Some things others have found helpful are:

From you to the pastor:

* + - The Ministry Site Profile
    - Copies of the Congregation's last several annual reports;
    - Several newsletters, publicity brochures, etc., describing the Congregation;
    - Information about the community - Chamber of Commerce info, etc.;
    - Topics/questions to be explored in the interview/visit; and
    - Sample bulletins from recent Sunday services
    - Website address

From the pastor:

* + - Annual reports from his/her current congregation;
    - Any other resume or mobility information not already shared;
    - Original material – sermons (on the website? Or a blog?), newsletter articles, class outlines, continuing education projects, etc;
    - A few bulletins from recent Sunday services;
    - A visit to the website of the church the pastor is serving; and
    - A visit to the elca.org website--identify pastor’s congregation then click on Trend Report for demographic information
  1. **Determine the Format of the Visit**. Before contacting the candidates, the Committee should plan for the visit. It is important to be open to the candidate's interests as well, but some

elements of the visit format might

* + - Time for the candidate to experience the parish community;
    - A walking or driving tour;
    - A meal in a local place;
    - A look at housing, educational facilities, library, and other places that may be of interest as reflected in your reports and/or the Pastor’s personal situation; An overview of where the current parishioners are living with the use of a map of the area
* Informal time for the Call Committee to experience an unstructured conversation with the candidate… and for the candidate to experience an unstructured conversation with Committee members. This often takes place around a meal.
* A formal conversation—the interview. (See the "Conducting the Interview.")

The following tasks will need to be covered by Call Committee members in structuring an effective candidate visit. Be clear about who will handle which responsibilities.

1. Set up appointments with candidates.
2. Determine what congregational materials will be given to the candidate and send before the actual visit.
3. Arrange for travel, housing, meals.
4. Determine who will meet and welcome the candidate.
5. Escort the candidate around the facility and allow time to “freshen up.”
6. Escort to Interview with Call Committee.
7. Escort to meal.
8. Provide opportunity to look around the community.

Important things to keep in mind regarding the interview stage of the Call Process include:

#### ALL expenses should be covered by the Congregation.

* + A spouse may attend but should not participate in the formal interview. (You may ask someone to host the spouse during this time)
  + Tell candidates the anticipated time line - when other interviews will be completed, decisions made, and candidates notified.
  + Determine who will write thank you notes.
  + The Committee may want to consider a video conference call for the first interview if the candidate is from another synod.

1. **Plan the Formal Interview.** The interview remains a frequently used technique by most congregations. Congregations rarely call a pastor without first having had the opportunity to get

to know them through the interview process. However, many members of Call Committees approach the interview with varying degrees of anxiety. Common concerns include: What is the purpose of the interview? What questions should we ask? What questions shouldn’t we ask?

How will we know if an answer is a “good” one? While each Committee will develop its own interview process and questions, the Committee should consider the following points when developing its approach:

**Planning the questions**: First of all, make sure you have read the information the Synod has provided about the candidate. Identify any information that may need to be clarified by the candidate. **The best way to develop call-related interview questions is by referring to the Ministry Site Profile, and the Candidate’s Rostered Minister Profile.**

Second, develop a format in which a pre-determined list of questions is asked of each candidate. Suggestions may include:

* 1. Tell us how your spiritual journey has brought you here to consider the possibility of this Call?

(2) Your forms say your first Call was at . Tell us about that ministry. What were your major accomplishments in that Call.

1. What were some of the things you did less well?
2. What did you learn about yourself in that Call?
3. What aspects of the Call were most challenging?

(If there have been several calls, you may want to combine questions about major accomplishments, areas of weakness, learnings, challenges, etc.)

1. What sort of ministry would you like to be doing five years from now?
2. How have you found your ministry being shaped by specific context--congregation, community, events, etc.?
3. How does your/our ministry relate to the ministry of the whole Church?
4. In your forms, you describe your leadership style as . Help us think about how our congregational leadership would best work with you.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, spend time exploring the pastor's Rostered Leader Profile and find questions that help you come to know him/her as a spiritual person and leader.

Situation-specific questions. Beyond this general level, the specific content of the interview should reflect the pastoral opening which is being filled. The majority of the interview, therefore, has the potential to vary from parish to parish and from call to call.

An emerging trend in interviewing is the use of so-called **“Situational Interviews**”. Situational interviews focus heavily on the behaviors necessary for success in a given setting. These kinds of interview questions ask the candidate what he/she would do in a particular situation, what he/she has done in situations in the past, and for specific demonstrations of relevant knowledge

or expertise. For example, let’s say that based on your analysis one of the factors you identify as important to success is working effectively with lay leadership. A sample situational interview question addressing this factor might be, “Suppose you and the worship committee disagree on whether Christmas carols may be sung before December 24th… or… Suppose your liturgical preferences are at odds with key members of the worship committee." What would you do?

By focusing on the most important (or critical) call-related factors, you will be focusing your interview on “what really matters.”

Once the Committee has decided upon the questions to be asked, assign questions to members of the Call Committee so the candidates feel all members are involved in the conversation. Discuss briefly the issues to be aware of in the interview itself (next section), including the extent of follow-up and spontaneous questions.

#### Discuss and agree upon evaluation criteria/form.

If you have planned well, you should also have agreed upon how you will evaluate what you hear. Using the areas of greatest concern as they've emerged in the Congregational Mission Profile/Ministry Site Profile and the interview questions, develop a ranking system for the candidates. This may be as simple as a grid on which each Committee member gives each candidate a 1, 2, 3, 4, or 5, with 5 being the best.

Just a word about using a “ranking format.” Each Call Committee member would receive a piece of paper with a grid format. Establish criteria based on your Mission Profile. This will reduce the subjectivity of the interview by helping Committee members listen for responses which correspond with better performance, insight, knowledge, etc. As the interview is held, each Committee member will grade the categories using a predetermined value system. For example, if the category is “strength as a pastoral care person” each person would rank their impression from the conversation 1 -5, with the 1 as lowest and 5 as highest. The ranking should focus on the areas deemed to be most important by the Call Committee. **This ranking should be done after the interview is completed, not during.**

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1. **Ongoing Evaluation**. To be completed after the Call Committee has mapped out its interview process, but prior to implementing it.
2. Is the Call Process well designed?
3. Does the content of the Process address our defined needs?
4. Does the Process match the capabilities of the Call Committee?
5. Was the “best practices” model helpful? Why or why not?
6. What challenges/obstacles remain? How will we overcome them?
7. **Are we confident that our process will allow us to select the best candidate?**

#### CONDUCTING THE INTERVIEW

Tips on Conducting the Interview:

1. The Call Committee should designate a Committee member to host the candidate. This person, frequently the Chair of the Committee, serves as the candidate’s contact person and should be on hand well before the candidate’s anticipated arrival at the interview location.
2. Following brief, formal introductions of each Call Committee member and his/her role in the congregation, a member of the Call Committee may conduct an opening devotion.
3. Following the devotion, the Committee member chosen to direct the interview should outline the anticipated procedure for the interview.
4. Listening, A Crucial Act
5. As noted above, the early questions should be foundational in order to allow the candidate to “settle in.” Questions which allow the candidate to introduce themselves (e.g., “Tell us about yourself” are appropriate here). Allow ten to fifteen minutes for this portion.
6. The formal questioning, with structured questions, should begin. Questions should be situational (i.e., call-specific) and may be asked by more than one member of the Committee.
7. If the response received from the candidate is unclear or incomplete, a follow-up question may be posed.
8. A Committee member(s) may be designated to record candidate responses using various means (e.g.written notes, audio,video) for further scrutiny by the Committee. **Audio and video recording should, however, be undertaken only with the consent of the candidate.**
9. Committees will vary in the length of time devoted to the structured portion of the interview. One hour may be typical, with two hours considered a desirable upper limit.
10. Allow time at the conclusion of the interview to answer specific questions posed by the candidate. After answering the candidate’s questions, a “wrap up” phase should be led by a member of the Call Committee in which the candidate should be thanked for coming and encouraged to be in phone contact with a designated member

of the Committee, should additional questions arise as a result of the interview. Future steps should be outlined, including the anticipated time line.

#### While the interview is still fresh in the minds of committee members, a time should be set to reconvene the Call Committee in order to share initial impressions. Impressions should be recorded for use at a later date.

1. **INTERVIEW FOLLOW-UP AND DECISION**
   1. **Following up on the Interviews**

The Call Committee should send a letter of appreciation to each candidate for his/her willingness to be interviewed. This letter may encourage the candidate to address additional comments and/or questions to the Committee. Any expense reimbursement should be made now. Again, a promise of keeping the candidate current regarding the Call Process is essential.

**It is crucial that the Call Committee immediately notify the candidate when s/he is no longer being considered**. (Sample letter at end of this Chapter.) The decision not to consider a candidate further should be submitted immediately to the Synod staff person who is assisting in the Call Process. Because it is the practice of some bishops to invite a pastor to interview exclusively for one call at a time, this notification will allow the Synod Staff, in consultation with the candidate, to submit a pastor’s name to another congregation currently in the Call Process.

#### Discernment/Decision

At a meeting following all interviews the Committee will begin a selection process. Suggested format might be as follows:

1. Begin with Prayer and Devotion

*Lord we come before you asking for the guidance of your Spirit. As we seek a new pastor keep us mindful of all that we have learned, all that we have heard and guide us. Grant us wisdom and understanding through this time. Amen*

1. Select a recorder for gathering information. (It is often helpful to have a sheet of newsprint for each candidate.) If a grid has been developed, these rankings can be compiled.

Each member of the Committee then, responds to three questions about the candidate.

* 1. Where did the candidate fit best with our congregational needs?
  2. a. What gifts does this candidate bring to ministry?

1. What areas of ministry are not strengths for this candidate?
   1. Could this person serve this parish well? (Could s/he serve as my pastor?)
2. Data or input from the Interim Pastor or other Staff may be heard at this time.
3. Review information gained from contact with references.
4. After data is collected on all candidates the Chairperson asks for comments/reflections or observations on the data.
5. Review

* Ask again for the guidance of the Holy Spirit
* Review and clarify the understanding of what it means to reach consensus
* Allow ample time for each Call Committee member to speak and be heard
* Come to a decision measured against the leadership needs of the Congregation
* Choose the most suitable candidate, not necessarily the one most likely to accept the Call
* While listening to your own heart and impressions, go beyond asking, “ Which candidate do I favor?” to “Which pastor can best serve our congregation?”

1. Each Committee member shares a statement or word reflecting their response and their choice.
2. Make a choice, especially if the selection is obvious based on comments from the Committee. The ranking should be used to guide Call Committee decision-making, but should not be the overriding factor.
3. If the Committee is inclined toward one or more of the candidates, and feels further in-put is needed, a second interview may be scheduled with one or more of the candidates.
4. If the Committee determines that no candidate can be recommended, then usually a meeting with the Synod Staff and the Call Committee is held to “debrief” the experience. This process may help to clarify the Committee’s expectations and also answer questions which may have arisen about how to proceed. Discussion with Synod Staff will determine the next step.
5. As a decision is made a prayer is offered. Each member of the Call Committee then states s/he will support the decision.
6. The Council President is informed of the recommendation of the Call Committee. The Call Committee prepares to present the candidate to the Council and the Congregation.
7. All candidates are promptly informed of decision. (Synod Staff is also informed of decision.)