The Vacant Parish: Managing a Pastoral Search Process

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The pastor just announced that soon he would be moving to another congregation. At once parishioners look at each other with a sense of anxiety and concern. Prayer for divine guidance accompanies conversations regarding just how the pastoral search process will proceed. Phone calls are made to conference leadership, and opinions are shared.

While the pastor’s decision to move provides an opportunity for the congregation to express trust, unity, and dependence on God, it also introduces risk.

How frequently do pastors move?

Congregations frequently confront pastoral transitions. Seventh-day Adventist pastors in North America, for example, move on an average of about every six years.1 In 1992, Arnold Kurtz noted that short-term Adventist pastors move every two to three years.2 Our research reveals a growing commitment of pastors to remain with the congregations they serve as they work through various issues toward a vision for evangelism and spiritual growth.

There are times when a pastoral move is well advised, and such transitions will remain inevitable. The purpose of this article is to describe a process that can make the transition experience a positive one for a congregation and affirm their relationship within a sisterhood of churches.

What values are involved in pastoral placement processes?

A responsible pastoral placement process requires application of at least three core values. The first is respect. The professionalism of pastoral ministry should be carefully regarded in both process and dialogue. Pastors respond to God’s calling and gifting, are equipped through considerable education and training, have accumulated experience in service, and are accountable for their own decisions in the calling process. Respect means a pastor’s personal responsibility to process their response to a transition must not be usurped by organizational leadership except in the most unusual circumstances. Conference organizations that exercise this value do not press arbitrary decisions on pastors regarding their place of service.

Trusting the leading of the Holy Spirit within a local church body calls for similar respect and restraint. This respect and restraint emerges from humility, the second core value. Conference leaders should demonstrate their confidence in the leading of the Holy Spirit and their high regard for the congregation by seeking prayerful reflection during a pastoral transition. Christian leadership is exercised in humility, not in power or control. A pastoral placement process becomes a wonderful opportunity for Christian leadership to be demonstrated by organizational servants. Humility opens the hearts and minds of both parishioners and their conference leadership to unite and participate together in the pastoral placement process.

Community is a third value expressed in a pastoral transition. As Adventists, we are committed to a vision of global mission that gives purpose to our worldwide organization. We carry forward evangelism and church growth more effectively as one world church rather than in isolation from one another. We maintain our essential message wherever the church is extended. In the nature of community, we find our value in relationship to the whole. Individual members of specific congregations who recognize this value will pray for God’s guidance in the search for a new pastor within the perspective of the larger community. They will welcome organizational leaders to initiate and guide participatory pastoral placement because those leaders provide the involvement of the larger world church body.

Accountability

Who employs the Seventh-day Adventist pastor? A more helpful question would be, To whom are Adventist pastors accountable?

An Adventist pastor is employed through the action of the executive committee for the conference of churches to which the congregation belongs. Conference leaders provide initiative in the placement procedures and carry out the decisions of an executive committee. They have no inherent authority to hire or terminate pastors. That is done by the executive committee of that conference.
A congregational pastor’s accountability is to the executive committee of the local conference. It might seem the pastor is not accountable to the local congregation. Experienced pastors know otherwise. True, the local church does not hire or terminate a pastor’s service. They do, however, give constant feedback, both formal and informal. They constantly let the pastor know how they are doing through numerous subtle, and sometimes less subtle, messages. The health of the congregation usually reflects pastoral leadership. The congregation provides the context for evaluation initiated by many pastors, and sometimes by the conference organization. Furthermore, the local conference actually comprises a constituency of local congregations in that conference. Executive committees of conferences are generally made up of a majority of lay members from various congregations and the others are denominational employees, some of whom are local pastors themselves. The local church has many ways to hold pastors accountable.

**Congregations in a world church**

The nature of the Adventist movement requires emphasis on our global vision. Our vision of a soon-coming Lord shapes our global mission for disciple making. Every local congregation holds accountability to the vision and mission our movement shares. The conference participation in the search processes helps the congregations actualize the concern for the global mission of the church.

To vigorously and meaningfully engage the local congregation in its pastoral placement process is important to the future of a world church movement. The vitality of our world church vision becomes damaged when local congregations retreat to parochial concerns, or committees or leaders of church organizations withdraw participation from the local congregation, thus depriving the local church of the vision, mission, and strategy of the world church.

**Matching the local congregation**

Mission is accomplished at the intersection of Christian believers and the lives of others in their neighborhoods, villages, cities, and workplaces. In the congregation, followers of Christ are encouraged, supported, and equipped in disciple-making activities. Pastors exercise and promote the building up of the church for service. It is evident then that the needs and context of a local congregation must be considered in the pastoral placement process, and a pastor must be well matched to the church.

**Steps in the process**

The pastoral placement process is complex and it involves both the conference and the local congregation leadership. There are several important aspects to this process. *Begin a conversation.* The local conference leaders should initiate a conversation with church elders regarding the pastor’s decision to move after the pastor has expressed to the congregation their desire to move. A meeting should also be arranged to which other church members are invited. In the case of a multichurch district, members from all of the churches should be invited. In the case of a multichurch district, members from all of the churches should be invited.

*Prayer is essential.* The placement process must be surrendered to God’s will, and this initial dialogue becomes the right time to recognize the role of divine guidance in the search process. Both the church and the conference, therefore, must unite in a concert of prayer.

The initial meeting of conference leaders and parishioners must review the entire search process. Members of the churches should share in the work involved. It should be affirmed that the decision to move was undertaken by the pastor and their family with prayerful thought and reflection. Some members may cling to an
outdated view that the organization somehow moved the pastor.

**Review the vision, mission, goals, and programs of the local church.** Conference leadership can form and pose questions empowering the members to share their perspectives. As members share their views and conference administration listens and lists them, initiative and ownership of the congregation and its mission are acknowledged. Understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the congregation or district is essential to appropriately match a new pastor.

The congregation should describe the initiatives they feel are important for a new pastor to continue. When parishioners struggle with that issue, they frequently move the conversation to the level of their values. In the process of that reflection, they form a spiritually centered and mission-driven vision for the ministry of their pastor.

**Focus on the kind of pastor needed.** An important aspect of the search process defines what kind of pastor is needed. Church members should be encouraged to speak out on the qualities they seek in their future pastoral leader. It should be clear that a list of pastoral candidates is formed by the personnel committee serving the conference, but that members are invited to contribute names early in the process. No contact in any way should be made with potential candidates until the process is well advanced, since to do so could unsettle their ministry in their present place of service. Before any conversations take place with potential candidates, permission should be obtained from the pastor’s current employer.

**Appoint a local search committee.** Many parts of the world have followed the practice of having congregational search committees that work closely with conference administration. This committee can be very valuable in the search process, but it does need to remember that the authority for appointment of a pastor is with the conference executive committee.

The search committee should prayerfully reflect on the qualities and experience of candidates provided by the conference personnel committee or surfaced in their own deliberation. They need to act within agreed time frames, submit deliberations to the conference personnel committee, and may possibly be reconvened to process names added later by the conference personnel committee. That conference personnel committee will make their final recommendations to the executive committee of the conference.

Conferences that facilitate the option of a local search committee should provide written guidelines describing how the search process functions and the role of each group. It is important that the role of each group is understood so that the process will move forward in an orderly manner.

**Share findings.** Once the conference personnel committee has prepared a qualified list of candidates, possibly with the inclusion of deliberations from a local church search committee, the conference should arrange a meeting with the church or district membership. This meeting is to review the names prayerfully and welcome feedback from members.

**Prepare a recommendation.** By now, the conference personnel committee should be ready for a recommendation to the executive committee. Once a decision is made by the conference executive committee, an official request should be made for the candidate to consider the potential call.

**Meeting with the candidate.** If the candidate responds positively to the conversation, it is advisable to arrange for a meeting with the candidate and the church or churches. Consultation with the local church is completed with a meeting introducing the pastoral candidate, and, in some cases, their spouse. The candidate should guide the core conversation on vision, mission, goals, and programs. They should listen and share their own history. The conference representative should ask the candidate to leave the room for a few moments following the conversation and receive feedback from the gathered members. In rare cases, there may be negative feedback. If handled properly, this process would negate that potential, and provide a positive environment to respond should concerns occur. If there is, for an unforeseen reason, a broad consensus that it is not a good match, this is the time for that decision. The call to the candidate should only be finalized after this introductory meeting.

**Installation.** Once the invitation is finalized, a service of celebration and affirmation should be planned. Usually installation happens during the pastor’s first worship service at the new church. With the members, church leaders, and conference representatives present, the service affirms the pastor in his pastoral ministry and helps the pastor launch his ministry in the context of the world mission of the church.

The journey of the church in the placement process with both local church and conference leadership having served important and prayerful roles demonstrates submission to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The world mission of the church can thus be pursued with joy and mutual thanksgiving.

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1 A random study of 200 pastors in the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America conducted in 2008 by the author reveals pastors moved from their last pastoral assignment after nearly six years.

2 In his article “Short-term Pastors!” in Ministry, January 1980, Arnold Kurtz noted research among American Lutheran pastors indicating that 20 percent to 25 percent move each year. His personal observation, relevant in 1980, was that Adventist pastors move every two to three years.