Converge Great Lakes

Great Lakes Baptist Conference

Navigating Pastoral Transitions

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Unified Mindset

One of the most critical points in the life of any church is the transition from one senior leader to the next. The church of Jesus Christ is built upon the premise that every person in the church is a minister (Ephesians 4:7-16) in that we have all been called by God to use our gifts and service for the building up of the body of Christ. We have been blessed by God with certain gifts for the church, as those who have been set apart by the Holy Spirit to equip us for those works of service.

The senior leaders do not "do" the ministry, but they are called by God to equip the laity (ministry saints) to use their gifts to glorify God and build up the body. When one of these "leaders of leaders" leaves, there is necessarily a genuine sense of loss and a void in the ministry of the local church. The good news is that though this is true, it does not mean that a church has to falter. In fact, if a church falters significantly in the absence of pastoral leadership it could mean that the church did not have a biblical understanding of the role of the clergy to begin with.

The GLBC exists to glorify God by strengthening churches so that they may reach those who do not know Jesus Christ locally, nearby, and around the world. One of the practical and important ways we do this is in coming alongside our churches and pastors during their time of transition. This can be a wonderful time of growth for a congregation, if the church family is willing to do the necessary work of both community and congregational assessment, along with the development of a search process that is orderly and has clear guidelines and parameters.

Unified Purpose

The purpose of this document is to provide some clear strategies and suggestions in both the community and congregational assessment areas. It is meant to be used as a guide, not dogma, and it can be contextualized for each congregation.

Unified Plans

I. Preannouncement stage:

The pastor has begun to sense that his time as pastor of a certain congregation is drawing to a close. He begins to seek God's direction and hopefully confides in the Board Chair that a change is taking place. This should not be a surprise to the Chair if the church has a regular and annual formalized evaluation process set up by the Chair. (If the church does not currently have such an evaluation process, Converge Great Lakes can come alongside that church in assisting them to formulate one.) Honest communication is critical at this stage. Conversely, the Board or other leaders in the church are beginning to possibly sense that the pastor's time is coming to a close. Instead of using rumor and innuendo, this formal evaluation process will surface and either validate or disregard those concerns.

It is critical during this stage that any communication be held in the strictest confidence. It is the recommendation of the District that a pastor not begin an active search for a new position until at least the Board Chair is informed. This might vary depending on circumstances, however, experience shows that trust (and not surprise) among leaders is critical to achieving a healthy transition for all parties.

II. Announcement Phase:

A. Voluntary Transition

If the pastor has voluntarily been pursuing other opportunities and has come to a place of decision, he should inform his Board a few days before the Candidating Weekend takes place with the District Executive Minister (DEM) present at that meeting. This assists the church in several significant ways:

1. It gives the Board a sense of empowerment that they are being trusted with this type of information and that there really was a relationship of trust between the Board and the pastor.
2. It also gives them a sense of hope that the broader denominational community is aware of what is happening and has encouraged the pastor to be forthright.
3. The Executive Minister can give the Board an immediate look forward in terms of next steps. This is a controversial suggestion. However, when this can be done, it sets the church up for the best possible transition because the leadership not only feels trusted but also can emotionally adjust ahead of the congregation and begin to put in place the necessary steps to shepherd the congregation through the actual resignation announcement which the District encourages to be done on a Sunday morning when a church will typically have the potential to inform the most people. The Board must not share this information with the congregation until after the official Candidating Weekend is over and the pastor has received a new call. However, the pastor needs to realize that if for some reason he does not receive a call from the new church, his leadership quotient is going to be limited by having disclosed this information to the Board prior to receiving the call. This is a risk that must be weighed carefully by the pastor before deciding to share with his Board prior to the actual call from the new ministry. In any case, the District stands ready, but it does suggest that some level of communication with the Board prior to the actual acceptance of the call is by far the healthiest way of approaching such a transition.

B. Involuntary Transition

In the case of a forced termination, the pastor and the Board should work out the details of the transition prior to any public announcement, including recommended severance, if any is forthcoming. (The Converge Great Lakes strongly encourages churches to have a severance policy in place prior to any forced termination. This cushions the emotional blows that are normal with this type of circumstance. If a church needs help in developing such a policy, the Converge Great Lakes is ready and willing to come alongside the church to help them to do so.)

Here are some suggestions that have helped other churches navigate this difficult circumstance:

- The public announcement should be written by the pastor, and seen and approved by the Board.
- There should be no deviation from this announcement.
- There should not be a time of questions at that point.
- A special business meeting should be called for that week and it should be communicated within a few days of the announcement, if possible. (Do not allow too much lag time between the announcement and this meeting).
- Do not restrict the meeting to “members only.” Most of our churches have far more regular attendees than members, with many who will be impacted by this decision.
- Announce that this is an “Informational Meeting” and do not entertain questions at this meeting either, as these will tend to be emotional in nature and not well thought-out, causing possible harm.
- The full Board should be visible at the time of the announcement.
- Provide a handout with names and phone numbers of Board members so they may be phoned for further dialog.
- The answers that Board members give to callers need to be thought through ahead of time and written out to ensure that everyone is saying the same thing.
- At the special business meeting the pastor should be allowed (in an unforced termination situation) to share how he and his family have come to this point and

why. This statement should be written out and approved by the full Board ahead of time.

- Accusatory remarks about the church or others are unacceptable. The tone of the letter and focus needs to be what the Lord is doing, not what the church did or did not do.
- The church Chair should then explain the process that has taken place and what to expect over the next several months.
- This should be in writing and passed out during the meeting. The process needs to be clear and to make sense to the average lay person.

Synopsis of Search Process

Below you will find a complete synopsis of the District Search Process. Each step will be elaborated upon in the body of the Navigating Pastoral Transitions document below.

Search Process Steps

1. Conduct both Congregational and Community Assessments.

2. Synthesize those assessments into a two to four page document.

3. Select Search Committee members.

4. Put together a position description based on the Community and Congregational Assessments.

5. Put together packets that include: a cover letter; pastoral position paper; and, position description that will be sent out to the individual pools. The position description should be put together by the governing Board of the church with consultation and confirmation of the body. Be sure to include an ending date in which résumés will be accepted.

6. Identify pools where possible candidates could come from and send out packets. (Example Candidate Pools: Denominational offices, colleges and seminaries, larger churches that have multiple staff people and congregational referrals).

7. Put together a rating system that includes rating points to evaluate each résumé based on Assessment Summary information.

8. Evaluate each résumé based on the point system and response criteria developed. Eliminate those who do not meet minimum requirements sending an immediate thank you note to them.

9. Develop an application that includes three to four scenarios that you would like addressed by the applicant and also a place for him to give permission for second and third level references. For each response, establish what you would like to see included so that when you evaluate the applications a system will already be in place signifying whether or not the responses meet your established criteria.

10. Send out a brief letter explaining the rest of the process with the application that you have developed. Include a request that he send you a VHS or DVD recording of two sermons he has preached. (Do not view the sermons at this time - see steps 11&12)
11. Evaluate the applications and scenarios. Sort out applications and make reference check calls going to the third level reference checks, as able. If possible, have two people making the calls together so that they can immediately summarize what the references said.

12. Present your findings to the group and together decide if you want to view the VHS/DVD recording of their preaching. This should be done together. If the Converge Great Lakes Speaker's Evaluation Form would be useful, please contact the office at office@convergegreatlakes.org or 608-244-5000 to request this form.

13. View preaching to evaluate if the style is a fit for your congregation.

14. Use the preaching VHS/DVD, reference checks and applications to select your top five or six candidates.

15. Conduct phone interviews together having the candidate and spouse on the call. Make sure you have six to eight standard questions established that you ask each candidate and then several additional questions that specifically relate to each potential candidate. Do not interview the candidate without his wife also on the call.

16. Pare the list down to the top three candidates. (SECRET VISITS Prior to Face to Face Interviews: These visits can be done prior to or after you have selected the top three candidates. Sometimes these secret visits to the candidate's place of ministry give a better context of who the candidate is).

17. Interview each candidate and spouse face to face in a secret place. Clearly communicate to them the financial package the church is offering as well as any other information they would want such as your constitution, financial cost sheets over the last three years, etc.

18. Select the top candidate. Call the other two candidates to let them know they are not the top candidate but that if the top candidate is not called you will be in touch. Follow up these phone calls with a letter to each of the other two candidates reiterating what you have said to them.

19. Before the final candidate is made public to the church, the Converge Great Lakes Executive Minister, upon invitation by the local church, will conduct a 15-20 minute final interview typically by phone with your top candidate. A minimum of the Search Chair present, if the whole Search Committee is not available, is requested. After the interview is concluded, he will debrief privately with whoever represented the church during the interview, the search committee or search chair. Then, he will give you his impression as well.
    - The purpose of the interview is threefold: 1) Make a relational connection between the candidate and the district through the Executive Minister, 2) Ask three to four questions about the candidate's background, specifically to follow-up if there were any red flags related to the candidates theology based on the review of the candidate's material sent to the DEM. This is done so that if the search team has not addressed these areas, they can before the candidating experience, 3) Share information about the District's ministries specifically connecting the candidate to the LEAD Team in the candidate's prospective area.
    - To assist in this interview process the candidate will be sent prior to the interview the Converge Worldwide (Baptist General Conference) statement of faith and ministerial code of ethics and have the ability to ask any questions related. If the call is confirmed CGL asks that the candidate sign both documents and send them back to the CGL office via email, fax (608-244-7155) or postal mail (PO Box 14745, Madison, WI 53708).

20. Implement the Candidate Week, laid out below.

21. CONFIDENTIALITY: The importance of confidentially throughout this entire process cannot be stressed enough. Monthly updates to the congregation are important and should include where the Search Committee is at in the process; however, all names should be withheld.

22. REFERENCE: Travis Albrecht, Pastor of North Shore Church in Menominee, MI is a reference for you to contact when formulating documents to support your search (such as profiles and applications). His contact information is: Church Office: 906-863-3212; or email: pastortravis@nshorechurch.org

Assessment Task Force

1. Allow for a time of healing, restoration, prayer and commissioning of the former pastor.
2. Appoint an Assessment Task Force. (This is different from a Search Committee. The Search Committee is appointed by the governing Board or per the church's constitution after the Assessment Task Force has completed its task.) An in-depth Community Assessment should be completed (a good resource offered to churches for a nominal fee, is available at www.perceptgroup.com). The district can help resource the church in this area. Also, an in-depth Congregational Assessment should be completed. No decisions on potential candidates should be considered during this time. The result of the work of the Assessment Team is a two to four page pastoral profile. This document should be a stand-alone document that any prospective candidate can peruse to get a good "feel" for both the congregation and her needs, as well as the community in which he would potentially live and minister. The document should include some appealing facts to motivate a candidate who does not yet know you (the church) or the area.

The District strongly recommends that at the end of the grieving period (no more than 4-6 weeks) an Interim Pastor be chosen who agrees in writing that he will have no future interest in the church as a pastoral candidate. The role of the interim may vary depending on the needs of the church, but he should not get overly involved in the day-to-day running of the church. This can create unnecessary conflict down the road. (Please refer to the Interim Protocol document from Converge Great Lakes which describes the three types of interims).

Pastoral Search Committee (Responsibilities & Procedures)

Once the time of grieving is over, the interim pastor is in place, and both assessments have been completed, a Pastoral Search Committee should be appointed to review the data from both the Community and Congregational Assessments. A position description is developed by the governing Board in consultation with and confirmation by the church body.

Once the Search Committee is organized, they should then walk through the Navigating Pastoral Document with a representative of Converge Great Lakes in order to ensure they understand the search process. The DEM's input will be very helpful during this phase. The Search Committee then begins to identify the various pools of potential candidates. Contact with the candidates includes:

- A cover letter
- The Position Description (which does not include salary information)
- The Church and Community Profile

Make sure you have an ending date for those who will be applying. A recommended ending date for the initial résumé inquiry would be three months after you send out the initial letters to the various pools.

If desired, it is appropriate at this time for the church to join Converge Worldwides's *Ministry Connect* and send their church profile to the Ministry Connect system.

A. Designing the Position Description Evaluation Tool

The Position Description should be divided into individual criteria assigning a scale of 1-to-5 to each item (5 is highest and 1 the lowest.) A minimum threshold of "points" needs to be established by the Search Committee. All applicants who rank below this threshold will immediately be mailed a gracious rejection letter.

B. Develop and Send out Application

Those who surpass this threshold will be contacted by letter requesting a completed brief, two to three page application. This application will ask for basic information such as name, address, and employment history. However, the main focus of this application is three or four possible-scenario questions. The candidate's answer to these will give some insight into how he would function in some critical areas, as judged by the church. (Contact the District for sample applications. They will refer you to some of our churches who have completed this process.) The second major purpose of this application is to get a written, signed permission from the potential candidate to conduct second and third level reference checks. Also, request that he send in two more current examples of his preaching on DVD; however, the Search Committee will refrain from looking at the tapes until they have completed the reference checks. (The District Office can supply a written evaluation form to judge the quality of the sermon. Please contact Converge Great Lakes in order to receive a copy of this form).

C. Reference Checks

Reference checks have two parts:

- A minimum of three "deep reference checks" will be conducted after the initial contacts. The first level of references is from the candidate himself. The second and third levels are those references that come as a result of interacting with the first level of references. A Church and Community Profile synopsis will be sent to each reference.

- Compiling the data: Based on the data gathered from the initial review of the information received from the applicants along with the reference checks, a grid of top applicants will be developed.

Phone Contact

The District suggests at least five applicants be brought to the next level (you can have more than this if they are qualified, based on your criteria), which involves personal interaction with the applicants for the first time in the process. Each applicant will have been evaluated based on: the initial résumé; application with scenarios; three deep-reference checks; and, an evaluation of his preaching on at least two different messages.

A phone conference will be set up with the entire Search Committee and the applicant and his wife. Both must participate in the phone call. The conversation should focus on the position description and further dialog about the candidate's background. If possible, phone calls should be done with the entire committee present as this allows immediate feedback after the call. Six to eight standard questions should be asked of each candidate as well as specific questions for each candidate concerning him and his background. It is critical that if the candidate is married, that both candidate and spouse are present on the call.

Once these calls are completed, a ranking of potential applicants is done. The top three applicants are kept in the search. The others are sent a gracious thank you letter immediately.

Face to Face Interviews

Once the top three applicants are chosen, secret visits to each applicant's place of ministry may be done. This will give the Search Committee an even greater sense of who this candidate is. If it is within driving distance, the entire Search Committee should go. If not, representatives from the Search Committee should be sent. This is an optional part of the process but can, at times, be very beneficial. The salary and benefit package should be clearly laid out for each of these final three candidates as well as your last three years' budget, constitution and any other important documents that would help the candidate ascertain whether he may want to continue in the search if chosen as the final candidate.

Monthly updates on Sunday morning should be made by the Search Committee. The Committee Chair needs to make sure that these statements are accurate and that they do not over-promise or identify candidates by name.

After these interviews, rankings are done and the top applicant is called immediately in order to set up a Candidating Weekend experience. The other two candidates are also called and told if the first candidate is not called, the second ranked candidate would then be contacted.

The Candidating Weekend

The best scenario is to invite the candidate to come for two consecutive Sundays. This gives the church family an extensive time with the candidate during the week, as well as time with him during the weekend services.

1. However, many times this cannot be done and therefore, a shorter candidating experience is commonly developed with the following components in mind:
2. The candidate, his wife and children are invited to come. It is important that his family feel comfortable with the congregation and leadership, as well as in making the move.
3. Several interactions will be set up with such entities as the governing Board, ministry leaders, general overall membership, etc.
4. Depending on the church governance model, a vote would traditionally take place immediately after the final service and interaction with the candidate. This procedure can vary depending on the church. However, a vote should be taken within a reasonable time and the results communicated to the candidate.
5. If the vote is to affirm the Search Committee's recommendation, a transition plan is put in place that has already been agreed upon by the candidate, the Search Committee and the governing Board. This is communicated verbally and in writing to the church.
6. The candidate should have adequate time to investigate the city with a qualified real estate agent during this time as well as a time to rest.
7. All salary and benefits issues should have been worked out in writing with the candidate -- including vacation, study leave, insurances, other benefits, etc.
8. A signed agreement by the governing Board and the candidate must take place prior to the candidate's move.

The Beginning

Pastoral transitions can be times of both anxiety and exhilaration. They can be times of anxiety if the leadership of the church does not give a clear and consistent vision and specific, step-by-step direction during the transition process. Excellent leadership is critical, and the better prepared the leadership is for these inevitable times, the better the church will be able to respond to what God is doing in their midst.

The Converge Great Lakes is honored to come alongside member churches during this pivotal time to help navigate the sometimes confusing sea of change, in order to accomplish Christ's mission in the communities that God has called them to reach.