Dave Odom: Searching for a pastor

*Search committees are sometimes in awe of their responsibility to chart the future of a congregation and examine the qualifications of a prospective pastor. This strategic work isn’t just about identifying a skilled leader but about finding one with the right mix of skills and character.*

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*May 8, 2012* | Serving on a pastor search committee can be overwhelming.

You are helping to set the course for an entire congregation. You must balance multiple points of view about what kind of pastor is needed -- and sometimes the advice you get is conflicting.

You find yourself peering into the spiritual life of a clergy member, learning about his or her practices of reading Scripture and praying, as well as making judgments about the candidate’s relationship with God and sense of call. You have to evaluate the candidate’s preaching, teaching, management and pastoral skills.

This discernment process can take weeks of discussion to reach consensus. Most often, committees can’t reach consensus or even fully articulate what they are looking for until they have interviewed a few candidates. Some committees, weighed down by the concentration and commitment, tire before they’ve found the right person.

How can you possibly do all of that faithfully? Will this process, and these lines of questioning, be enough to help you find the person you’re seeking?

In my years of experience working with search committees, denominational leaders and candidates, I’ve learned that it can be helpful to focus a search around these two questions: Can this pastor love us? Is this pastor competent?

These two questions help shape the mindset of the search committee, focusing its members not just on what the pastor can do well but on what the pastor can feel and see. A successful search, in other words, is an art -- not merely a process to be mechanically followed but a heartfelt evaluation of excellence in character and skills.

This approach is grounded in Scripture. The relationship between a pastor and a congregation is intimate. As with all Christian relationships, the quality of our love for each other is a reflection of our relationship to Christ (John 13:35).

As committee members discern whether a pastor can love the congregation, they are making judgments about the pastor’s commitment to God and how that is reflected in his or her capacity to love everyone -- those who are more and less easy to love. Ultimately, the question comes down to the character of the pastor. In what ways has the character of the pastor been formed by God’s love?

Questions about a pastor’s competence include all the basics of preaching, teaching and caregiving, along with how the pastor functions as a leader. Evaluating competence requires discernment about the ability of the pastor as well as the style preferences of the pastor and the congregation.

One way to jump-start the search process that holds these elements together is to interview people who have completed a search process in the past year. Find out the practices or questions that helped other committees discern the gifts that have proven to be most important in the new pastor’s leadership. Ask when they realized the pastor whom they called was the one. What did they observe in that moment? What conditions were present that created the moment?

These stories can spark a conversation in the committee about both the character traits and ministry skills that are critical for the work and the outward signs of those traits and skills.

It is the outward signs -- what the committee can observe, and not just what the committee hears -- that will help the committee discern that mix of character and skills. The search should be shaped around creating opportunities to observe the candidates rather than simply peppering them with questions.

For example, the way a pastor interacts with the waitstaff at a restaurant indicates how the pastor sees the invisible in our society. Sharing personal concerns with the pastor and noting whether and how the pastor follows up in subsequent conversations indicates how the pastor builds relationships over time.

Clues about a pastor’s mindset can be observed by inviting the pastor to take the lead and interview the committee about the church and the community. How does the pastor build rapport with the group? What does the pastor ask about? What does the pastor ignore? How does the pastor make sense of and interpret what is said?

This will also create an opportunity to understand what the pastor sees in the church and the community today and the possibilities he or she envisions for the future. The mindset the pastor brings to the position will be critical to understanding which ministries the pastor will encourage and whether the pastor understands how to envision and execute, cultivate relationships and accomplish tasks.

In “The Rare Find: Spotting Exceptional Talent Before Everyone Else,” author George Anders describes how organizations as diverse as Facebook, the U.S. Army Special Forces and Teach for America discover and develop talent.

In the chapter “Picking the Boss,” Anders describes the importance of asking “the third question.” The first question opens the subject, the second digs a little deeper, and the third presses for a concrete example. By asking three questions, one can press beyond ideas to a candidate’s convictions. When asked to cite an example, the candidate often reveals work habits.

Search committee members feel as if they are on holy ground as they examine the calling and life of prospective pastors -- and that sense of awe can make careful observation and probing questions feel uncomfortable.

Can this pastor love us? Is this pastor competent? Returning to these two questions will help the committee understand a prospective pastor’s character and skills and how well they may match the congregation and its context.