

## INTERVIEWING FOR A MINISTRY

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### I. General Considerations

In the past, extreme positions have been taken on both sides of the “preacher competition” issue in hiring a minister. At one extreme is the practice of bringing in three or four ministers for “trial sermons” and then taking a vote on which one the people want. At the other extreme is the policy ministers may advocate that search committees look at only one candidate at a time and decide yes or no before passing on to the next one. It seems curious that ministers want to look at several congregations and decide which one to take, but they do not want a congregation looking at more than one minister.

Obviously the procedure for hiring a minister must have the congregation’s best interests at heart without creating a contest atmosphere out of the situation. A congregation may not be able to tell whether other prospects are going to be any stronger than the one they are now looking at but may not be entirely satisfied with. Other stronger prospects may not accept the ministry there. To get a feel for the relative strengths of more than one prospect, the selection committee can interview more than one candidate, compare resumes, check references, conduct telephone conversations, and the like—anything short of presenting more than one at a time to the whole congregation. Doing the latter creates a situation where some like one candidate and some like another and division can result. It also puts too much emphasis on pulpit ability relative to the other skills needed in a healthy ministry.

If at all possible, you should take your wife and family along with you to the church where you are interviewing. The wife will probably not be involved in the interview itself (although there can be some advantages to her being present). Nevertheless she and the children will need to establish a sense of belonging with the future move you and the congregation decide to make. Your wife and kids will want to see what kind of living arrangements to expect. It is good for the congregation to see the personality of your spouse and to see how the kids behave toward you. They will be able to tell how well all of you meet people you do not know. They will feel more confident about all of you if they can see that you are not withdrawn or backward people.

Depending on the circumstance, it is advisable to have more than just one evening to interact with the situation. You will want to drive around the community, see where the schools are located, meet as many of the church leaders as you can in an unstructured setting, look at the parsonage if the church has one, survey the facilities, meet other staff people the congregation may have and get a chance to talk with them informally.

### II. Sample Questions for Ministers to Ask

1. Does the church have by-laws, an organizational chart for the work of the church that includes staff members and their roles as well as a list of the active committees, and anything else that would indicate the variety of ministry, the number of people actively

involved in it, and so on? What governing board do you look to for final responsibility? Who is on this board? What “officers” do you have in the church? Who has the authority to hire and dismiss staff members? These and other factors will help you get an idea about how the operation of the church is carried out.

2. What job description do you use for the minister? Do not be surprised if they have a difficult time verbalizing what it is that they expect from a minister. Working out expectancies for the ministry may end up being something that you will actually do in the interview if other considerations are going well. You will need to inform them about many of the behind-the-scenes activities a minister performs. In smaller churches—or in churches that do not have very many people who have a very clear idea of what ministers do, the people will tend to develop a “job description” that ends up equally the sum total of all the things they can see and imagine that needs to be done in a church: youth work, hospital and shut-in visitation, preaching, teaching a Sunday school class, conducting a mid-week Bible study/prayer meeting, calling on prospects for conversion and membership, counseling people with difficulties, being involved in community activities, perhaps even taking care of the grounds. That list has to be identified as the ministry of the church rather than the work of the minister. Obviously a minister has more time to do these things than other people do, but unless the congregation is very small he will not be able to do all these things.

Together you will need to go through the total list of things needing to be done and select the ones you will concentrate on and agree to work out later how the other tasks can be covered. Consequently, it is a good idea to have at least a mental list of typical tasks to survey in making out a realistic picture of what your abilities, energies, and situation enables you to do. It may be advisable to list these activities on a blackboard and put time amounts beside each one in order to help the interviewers see that all their expectancies cannot be met by one person. You may be able to arrive at some percentages of your time that together you would tentatively assign to each activity.

3. How do you view the minister’s role in relation to other leaders of the church? Do you conceive of the elders and the minister as having an employer-employee relationship, or from a practical standpoint is this a team effort? To put it differently, do you think of the minister as the one you hire to do the work or to lead in doing it? It may be helpful to encourage looking at the minister as someone supported so he can concentrate on that work, a work others are involved in also insofar as their time and energy allows. He is also someone who has had more learning opportunities than the other men normally have had.

4. Who are the leaders in the church and what vocations do they have?

5. What kind of program do you presently have: Bible studies, Sunday school, system, outreach, visitation for shut-ins, etc.? How are the people responding to it?

6. What meetings in the church (and community) is the minister expected to attend? Is he expected to attend all committee meetings and all Sunday-school class socials?

7. What kinds of decisions does the congregation typically allow/expect the minister to make?

8. What are the demographics of the community and the church: age groups, classes of people, professional people, community leaders, retired people, vocations represented? Are there certain strata that the church seems to draw its membership from?

9. Is a map of the area, especially one that shows where members live in relation to the church?

10. What kinds of talents do people have in the congregation, particularly in music and teaching.

11. What tensions in the church should I be sensitive to in coming into this ministry? What is the quality of race relations in the community and how have these affected the church? Are there any “pet peeves” the minister here needs to avoid? How the leadership gets along can be surmised by the atmosphere in the interview itself.

12. Find out what kind of special difficulties may be in the community and in the church so you can be on the lookout for them should you decide to accept the ministry and so you can assess whether you can deal with those matters. What have been some of the more significant events in the life of this congregation since you have been involved here? What has been the most upsetting experiences in the past?

13. What needs and problems exist in the community? Is it a growing, declining, transient, or stable community?

14. Try to find out the circumstances surrounding the last change of ministry. What kinds of things was the previous minister good at? In what areas do you wish your previous ministers would have had more expertise? Who have been the past ministers for the church, how long have their ministries lasted, and what have been some reasons for their leaving?

15. Does the congregation have some objectives and long-range goals?

16. What is the present membership of the church and how does that compare with the attendance figures? How do Sunday school, church, and Bible studies attendance figures compare?

17. What kind of missions outreach does the congregation support beyond the local body? What Bible College/s and missionaries does the church support and how closely are they aligned with these efforts? Does the church support an area evangelizing association?

18. What Christian service camp does the church support and how many young people are involved each year in the camping program?

19. Try to find out what the image of the congregation is in the community and what kind of relationships the church has with other churches in the area. Particularly you want to discover what attitude the leadership takes toward these other groups. Are the regular area men’s and women’s meetings? Are there interdenominational gatherings such as prayer breakfasts that people in the church attend? What kind of attitude do you think is appropriate toward Christians outside this brotherhood? Would there be any objection to using resource people from outside the brotherhood in areas where their distinctives would not affect their assistance to us in this ministry?

20. How comfortable are the people with variety and change in the way worship and ministry is carried on in the church? Have changes in the worship service disrupted the congregation in the past? Is the minister typically in charge of the service?

21. What is the financial condition of the church? How much indebtedness does it have? What is the giving per capita? What is the church’s program of stewardship? What is the size of the church budget? How much of the budget goes to missions?

22. What kind of attitude would the leadership take toward your possible interest in continuing education? What kinds of assistance have you given former ministers to help them improve their work? There are seminars conducted across the country that help in the practical day-to-day work of the kingdom. Some seminaries have developed Master of Ministry programs specifically for ministers who cannot leave the area of service and spend one to three years on a campus following formal educational pursuits.

23. Does the congregation typically have a contract with the minister? Encourage having one, because people often forget the terms of agreement and it keeps things more objective. Be sure, however, not to make the agreement so detailed that it locks you into an inflexible circumstance.

24. Over the years how many people have entered the ministry from this congregation and who are they?

25. What kind of attitude does the church take toward any special interests and activities you may be involved in outside the local church: writing, seminars, etc.?

26. Does the minister have input in staff selection? Does the minister or the board of elders hire or fire the secretary?

27. What characteristics are you looking for in a minister? Are there any particular reasons you are interested in me for coming to this ministry?

28. Would the church feel comfortable with significant numerical growth in the church? Would the people be willing to go to dual services if need warranted?

29. Does the church have a concept of local church membership and, if so, and how does a person become a member? What is the status of "members" that no longer attend or otherwise support the work?

30. Has the congregation had to exercise church discipline? Are immoral people dealt with firmly but with love?

It might be helpful to have someone serve as a secretary for interview so memory failure does not detract from the quality of results. Financial matters will need to be discussed as well. These will probably come up last and should be left till the other items are covered adequately. For a run-down on aspects of the financial package, see separate hand-out.

### III. Questions You Should Be Prepared to Answer

Many items will already have been included on your resume: personal background, family, circumstances, educational background, and ministerial experience. You may find these being asked again if for no other reasons than to loosen up the interchange between the persons in the interview and to give you an opportunity to personalize yourself to those present.

1. What doctrinal positional positions do you hold on typical controversial issues: the nature and work of Christ (virgin birth, sinlessness, resurrection, deity), the nature of scripture, the nature and work of the Holy Spirit (you may be asked to verbalize your attitude toward pentecostalism and the charismatic movement), baptism, women's work, the relationship of minister to elders, divorce and remarriage, eternal security, millennial questions (Christ's personal return, etc.)?

2. What does your wife typically do in the church? You can explain to them her skills, interests, past experience in church work, and the way she has functioned in the past to complement and reinforce you both personally and in the work of the church. It is best on this question to include something to the effect that she will do her part like the rest of the women in the congregation. Do not give the impression that, so to speak, the church will be getting two ministers for the price of one. After all she, like they, is a wife and mother and may be working outside the home as well.

3. What do you see yourself doing five or ten years from now?
4. Why did you decide to enter the ministry and who was instrumental in influencing you to make that decision?
5. Are there some things you like about the situation here as far as you know it?
6. What do you consider your strengths and weaknesses?
7. What are some of the things you like most and least about the typical located ministry?
8. Why are you interested in this church? That may be related to the question of why you are willing to consider a move from the one where you are.
9. How do you spend a typical day/week in ministry?
10. What is the family's attitude toward making a move at this juncture in their lives?