

10 Mistakes Pastorless Churches Make (And Recommendations for Avoiding Them)

Mistake #1 – Electing a “Pulpit Committee”

The problem here is both a problem of terminology and of process.

The word *pulpit* emphasizes what this person will do for no more than 3 hours per week. *Electing a committee* emphasizes a process of nominating, approving, and (to a large extent) forgetting on the part of the congregation, and a process of discussing, negotiating, and deciding on the part of the committee. It is a process that risks an emphasis on the *mechanics of a decision* rather than on the *ongoing spiritual journey* of seeking the will of God.

Recommendation - Empowering a *Pastor Search Team*

A *committee* may make a decision based upon a majority vote. A *team* seeks to reach a goal based on unity and consensus. The congregation that *elects* a committee may be disengaged from the process until a decision is made. The congregation that *empowers* a team may sense a greater investment in and connection to the ongoing process.

A *pastor* search acknowledges that the congregation is not just looking for someone who will *conduct services and preach to them*, but who also will *do life with them*. A pastor will counsel, encourage, teach, visit, laugh, cry, disciple, marry, baptize, bury (and a lot of other things that don't happen in the pulpit).

Questions for Reflection:

What qualifications are necessary for a person to serve on the Pastor Search Team?
How do we communicate to our church the difference between a *pulpit committee* and *pastor search team*?

Mistake #2 – The Baptist Beauty Contest of Supply Preachers

The problem here is a problem of focus and process.

The *Baptist Beauty Contest* is a series of guest preachers who may be *auditioning* for the role of pastor. The hope is that the congregation will find someone whose preaching they like and who is willing to

consider the possibility of being the pastor of the church. It is a process that is driven by (1) the necessity of having a sermon every Sunday during the pastorless time and (2) the previously mentioned focus on the *pulpit* part of the ministry.

The primary risk of this method is that it potentially divides the congregation. One preacher's *style* appeals to some. Another preacher's *subject matter* was particularly powerful for certain people on a particular day. Members of the congregation, some who may be spiritually and emotionally fragile or immature, begin to select their "*favorite*."

Recommendation 1 – Traditional Interim Pastor

The *Traditional Interim Pastor* helps the congregation in a number of ways. First of all, it resolves the issue of who is going to preach on Sunday (takes care of the *pulpit*). No individual or team has to devote time and energy to the weekly enlistment of a preacher. Secondly, the Interim Pastor will likely help to fulfill some of the other duties that typically fall to the pastor, such as some hospital visitation, as well as funerals and weddings that may occur during the interim. How many of those duties will fall to the Interim Pastor will depend upon the ministry structure of the congregation and the particular agreement between the congregation and the Interim Pastor.

One generally accepted rule of thumb is that the Interim Pastor will *not be considered* as the permanent pastor. The reason for this is that it undermines the pastor search process by allowing someone who is present weekly to build relationships with the congregation. It may once again create division when members of the congregation begin to question the work of the pastor search team by suggesting that there is nothing wrong with "who we have."

There are certainly instances where a congregation has called the Interim Pastor as the permanent pastor. *Some* of those instances have worked well. *Many* of them have not. This does not mean that God *never* leads a pastor search team to recommend calling the Interim. However, if the Interim begins to believe that the Lord might be leading him to make himself available, a good practice is to *resign* as interim, submit a resume, and go through the process like every other candidate. If that situation occurs, it is incredibly important for the pastor search team to focus on discerning God's will, not protecting the feelings of one who has been serving the church in the interim.

Recommendation 2 – Intentional Interim or Transitional Pastor

A second possibility is the *Intentional Interim* or *Transitional Pastor*. These are not exactly the same, but they are close enough to put together for the sake of this reflection guide. This person will perform the same ministry duties as the Traditional Interim Pastor. The difference is that this will be an individual who has received *specific training* in how to lead a church through the necessary transitions in preparation for the time when a permanent pastor will be called. While this may be a powerful process for any pastorless congregation, it has been demonstrated to be particularly effective with two types of congregations.

The first type of congregation is one where the previous pastor was there for so long that the congregation's identity and vision are wrapped up in that individual. An Intentional Interim or

Transitional Pastor can lead the congregation through a process of self-discovery, celebrating their history, and re-visioning their future. Once the congregation has gone through that process, the next pastor is less likely to be constantly reminded of the way Brother So-and-So used to do things.

The second type of congregation is one where there has been a history of turmoil or crisis. Sometimes a congregation needs time to heal. Sometimes there are **systems** in place that contribute to continued failure and unhealthy choices. An Intentional Interim or Transitional Pastor can help a congregation identify those unhealthy systems and walk with them through the steps of developing processes to break the cycle of turmoil.

Typically, an Intentional Interim or Transitional Pastor will have a stated agreement (contract or covenant) with the church to serve in that capacity for a **specified time period** while he leads the church through the necessary transition processes. The agreement also includes the agreement that the church will not undermine the transition process by beginning the pastor search process prematurely. It is also understood that the Intentional Interim or Transitional Pastor will not be considered for the permanent pastor position.

Questions for Reflection:

What type of Interim ministry would best serve the needs of our church at this time?
What needs/issues should be addressed in our church before we call a pastor?

Mistake #3 – Having no written Job Description for Pastor

The problem here is a problem of expectations and communication.

What is a pastor supposed to do? Isn't that detailed in Scripture? Didn't they teach that in seminary?

While the New Testament does provide some guidelines on the **character** of those who have leadership roles within the church, there are no Scriptural guidelines for specific activities of pastors. Whether we like it or not, the reality is that most twenty-first century churches are not structured like first century churches. There are **expectations** of the twenty-first century pastor that most first century Christians could never possibly have imagined. Furthermore, every church will not have the exact same expectations.

When those expectations are not agreed upon by the church Body and compiled into a written job description, the pastor is left trying to figure out how to fulfill the expectations of the **unwritten** pastoral job description of **each individual member**. A church without a written job description will have as many unwritten job descriptions as it has members. And many of those unwritten descriptions will carry expectations **that Jesus himself could not fulfill**.

Recommendation - Implementing a Pastoral Covenant

Certainly, the **first step** is to develop a written job description that outlines the expectations of the pastor. This job description should include character qualities that should be exhibited through the pastor's behavior, the specific ministry areas he is responsible for leading, how he works with other leadership (deacons, elders, other staff), office hours, and other items that the church deems appropriate. The intent of this job description is to **eliminate unwritten and unrealistic expectations** and to clearly communicate those expectations that the church (as a whole) has agreed upon as essential.

A further, **and better**, step is to go beyond simply outlining the expectations the church has of the pastor through a written job description. The pastor should also know what he can expect from the church. A **written covenant** between pastor and church would include the pastor's affirmation that, when he accepts the call as pastor of the church, he accepts the terms of his job description. The covenant would also include the church's affirmation that, when they call a pastor, they agree to such things as praying consistently for him and his family, refraining from talking about him behind his back, coming to him and speaking the truth in love when there are differences, supporting and encouraging his role as a husband and father, respecting his family time, and other such ideas that contribute to a healthy and effective ministry **together** between pastor and congregation.

Questions for Reflection:

What are the specific expectations we have of a pastor in our church?
What should our pastor be able to expect of us as we minister together?

Mistake #4 – Saving money while not paying pastor salary

The problem here is stewardship and kingdom focus.

There are few churches for which money is no issue. Every church has to deal with the reality of good stewardship and making resources go as far as possible. It is a temptation for the church, when they are not paying the salary of a permanent pastor, to just determine to build a **budget surplus**. It makes the income/expenses ratio look really good on the financial reports when we are taking in the money and not spending it. Church members may even begin to get the idea that, if the church is doing so well financially, maybe individuals could cut back on their giving.

The problem is that the church may lose their **kingdom focus** when they only concentrate on the "bottom line" budget. When the church finally calls a pastor and begins paying the salary, the budget surplus begins to evaporate. All of a sudden, those financial reports don't look so good and the new pastor may be held unduly responsible for the church's weakening bottom line.

Recommendation - Pay Interim salary and invest remainder of regular pastor compensation

More than likely, whatever salary is given to an Interim Pastor will be less than the full compensation package for the permanent pastor. Rather than leaving the remainder untouched to pad the budget, the church may have an opportunity for a *specific investment* of those resources during the interim time. There may be a *mission project* that could be funded. The church may have a parsonage in need of repair or upgrading before a new pastor arrives on the field. Perhaps a *new ministry* within the church needs some startup funds for supplies and equipment. The main idea is to focus on the opportunity to turn this short term reduction of expenses into a *kingdom-focused investment* that keeps the church engaged in what it costs to conduct the church's ministries.

Questions for Reflection:

How much of the regular pastor compensation package is not being spent during the interim?
What is the biggest ministry need that could be supported with those funds right now?

Mistake #5 – Failure to check references/asking the wrong questions

The problem here is failure to due diligence.

Horror stories abound from churches who called a pastor based on a couple of good sermons and then found out he was lacking in people skills, leadership abilities, financial integrity, cooperative spirit ... and the list goes on. Time after time, *a few phone calls* could have saved a lot of heartache.

It is disturbing how many pastor search teams fail to even contact the references listed on a candidate's resume. They just take the resume at face value, listen to him preach, and enjoy visiting with him about his interest in pastoring their church. The reference information is readily available and the candidate even believes that these individuals will give him a good recommendation, and yet the search team neglects this *most basic task*.

If the search team contacts references, they will more than likely get favorable recommendations if they only ask questions related to his preaching and fulfilling of his job description. However, questions about how he relates to people, what his leadership style is like, how he deals with conflict, what is his reputation in the community, how does he relate to other pastors, what are his strengths and areas where he needs to grow ... these may reveal issues that will either necessitate more questions or, in some cases, may eliminate him from consideration if the same concerns are brought up by several references.

Recommendation – Develop good questions. Check all listed references. Seek other references.

At the bare minimum, check enough listed references to get as complete a picture as possible. If a candidate lists 15 references, you probably don't need to contact all of them. A good cross section of 5-6 who are **not all from the same church** will probably give a good picture. With these references, don't just ask questions about preaching and pastoral duties, but find out how his character and passions are perceived by those he listed as references. This is done with **good questions**.

If the candidate is currently serving as pastor within an association, the Associational **Director of Missions** can be another good source of information. At the very least, the Director of Missions can give his **impressions** of the pastor's reputation, as well as what his current ministry is like and how he works in cooperation with other churches through the association. It is also essential to run a **criminal background check** and **credit check** on any candidate that is being seriously considered. The candidate must give permission for these checks to be conducted. Hesitance to give that permission should be a major "red flag."

In this digital age, it is also important to check out a candidate's online presence. What kind of things does he post on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube? What blogs has he written? All of these are public forums and will give a glimpse into the candidate's character.

Questions for Reflection:

What character qualities and skills are we looking for in a pastor?
What questions will we need to ask to help us get the information we want?

Mistake #6 – Being in a hurry/settling for what you can get (style over substance)

The problem here is failure to trust God.

Churches get in a rush to call a pastor for various reasons. Sometimes it is **panic**. Who is going to preach? Who is going to lead? Who is going to take care of us? There is a fear that the church will cease to function without the position filled. This is most often the case in smaller membership churches where most of the ministry centers around the pastor.

Sometimes the church may be experiencing **impatient fatigue**. Maybe the search has taken longer than expected and the search team is feeling the pressure, so they begin to slip into Mistake #5 of not checking references or asking good questions. They determine that they need to get someone in place so that the search team can be done and get back to their regular lives.

Sometimes the church may be **afraid**. They are afraid that they are never going to find the right person, so they better take what they can get. If someone expresses an interest and is willing to come and preach, maybe we better take him. There are churches that have lost their denominational identity, as well as their ministry identity and community reputation, because

they settled for someone who could preach a good sermon, but did not share their vision and values.

Recommendation - Use the interim to know who you are and identify non-negotiables.

Some of these issues can be alleviated to a large degree if the church calls a good interim pastor (either traditional or intentional/transitional). The pulpit is filled for worship services and many of the “pastoral” duties are being covered.

Even if the church does not choose to enter into an official intentional/transitional interim, it is still possible to use the interim time to conduct some surveys or town hall meetings to determine the church’s values and non-negotiables. If it is important for the church to be involved in community ministry, they should not call a pastor who has no interest in community ministry. If it is important for the church to be connected to the association, state convention, or denomination, they should not call an independent-minded pastor.

It is a sad thing for a church to settle for what they can get right now, rather than prayerfully waiting, continuing to minister and grow together, and trusting God for His provision of the right pastor for their church.

Questions for Reflection:

What are our church’s core values?
What are our non-negotiables?

Mistake #7 – Foot dragging/failure to launch

The problem here also is a failure to trust God (it just comes from the opposite perspective). It may also be a problem with common courtesy.

“We don’t want to get ahead of God.” This is a spiritualized cliché that sounds really good and is based on a legitimate need for focused prayer and wise procedures through the pastor search process. The truth is that we really don’t want to get ahead of God (the problem identified in #6 above). However, there are churches that have been in the pastor search process for two years or more while they are waiting for God to drop that perfect pastor in their laps. There is a fear here of *making the wrong decision*.

The problem is compounded when the inability to make a decision keeps pastoral candidates hanging on the line for months at a time. Consider this: the pastoral candidate’s life and ministry are disrupted to some degree from the time of first contact with a church until the time he is either called as pastor or informed that he is no longer being considered.

Recommendation - Identify concerns. Pray and decide.

If there is “something you just can’t put your finger on” about a candidate that is causing concern with moving forward, forget about your fingers and put your prayers and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit on it. Members of the pastor search team should not be hesitant to voice their concerns within the confidential and safe atmosphere of team discussions. Get all the concerns on the table and take it together to the Lord in prayer. Ask Him to guide the decision. Will the team be second-guessed if things do not work out? Yes. That is not a reason not to do what God is leading you to do. The team might give two consecutive meetings to doing nothing but praying over a particular candidate. If, after those meetings, there is still hesitance, you can probably trust that the Holy Spirit is leading you away from that candidate. Contact him and let him know that he is no longer being considered.

Good rules to live by: **1.** Every resume received should be acknowledged with some form of thank you (note, email). **2.** Every candidate eliminated from consideration should be informed of that as soon as he has been eliminated (handwritten notes are best for this). **3.** Once someone has been eliminated, it should be permanent. Don’t disrupt his life and ministry further.

Questions for Reflection:

What do we need to do to be sure that we are remaining focused on the leadership of the Holy Spirit? What procedures do we need to implement to be sure that we are dealing effectively with each candidate?

Mistake #8 – Not keeping the congregation informed on the process

The problem here is that the congregation may become impatient with and critical of the pastor search team’s lack of progress.

There are certainly pieces of information that the pastor search team will need to keep confidential. Names of candidates should not be shared with the congregation until the team is prepared to bring one of them to the church in view of a call. Then, only that name should be shared. It is also important that team members do not privately share information with spouses, close friends, etc. While keeping secrets from one’s spouse is not generally a good idea, there is a difference between keeping secrets and maintaining appropriate confidentiality. The team empowered by the church needs to be able to do their work unencumbered by opinions and input from those who have not been given the pastor search task.

That being said, the pastor search team is not seeking to discern God’s will for a pastor for the **search team**; they are seeking to discern God’s will for a pastor for the **church**. The church needs to be engaged in their part of the process just as much as the search team is engaged in theirs. So how does that happen?

Recommendation - Weekly update and prayer

Each week during the main worship service, there could be a time of prayer for the pastor search process and for the pastor search team members. A member of the team could report things such as: we are currently receiving resumes ... we have begun listening to sermons ... we have begun conducting preliminary interviews ... we have begun reference and background inquiries. Included with each brief report is an appeal for continued prayer and an expression of appreciation for those who are currently leading and ministering. This whole process could be done in 3 minutes each week. It would be 3 minutes well spent in keeping the entire congregation engaged.

Questions for Reflection:

What is important for us to share with the congregation this week?

What are our main prayer concerns at this time regarding the pastor search process?

Mistake #9 – Unrealistic Expectations

The problem here is related to Mistake #3 (not having a written job description or pastoral covenant), but it goes beyond that. This is a problem of expecting a man of God to be more God-like than Godly.

What does that look like? It looks like the expectation that the pastor is “on call” 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. It looks like the expectation that the pastor will always answer his cell phone, no matter what is going on at the moment. It looks like the expectation that the members of the church have the right to know where the pastor is if he is not sitting in his office when they drop by without calling ahead. It looks like the expectation that the pastor will be in his office at 8:00 a.m. even if he was sitting at the emergency room until 3:00 a.m. It looks like the expectation that the pastor’s children will be the best behaved children in the church and will be at every church activity. It looks like the expectation that the pastor will come home from his family vacation if one of the church members goes in the hospital. The list could go on and on. None of those are hypothetical. They are real expectations that real churches place on real pastors. ***And they are really, really dangerous.***

A Godly pastor helps point people toward God; he does not fulfill the role of God. He is a man who needs family time, rest, recreation, continuing education and development, time for refocus and renewal, and ministry partners. The calling of the pastor is not to minister to the church, but to lead and equip the church in ministry to one another and to the world.

Recommendation - Protect the pastor and family. Provide resources necessary.

In preparing the written job description, pastoral covenant, and budget, the church should protect the pastor and his family from unrealistic expectations. Some of those unrealistic

expectations can come from church members. Some can come from the pastor himself. The church should make it clear, both in policies and budgeting, as well as maintaining an atmosphere of trust and respect, that the pastor is expected to do the necessary self-care to maintain his effectiveness in all areas of life.

Some practical applications of this principle: (1) A generous vacation policy that takes his prior ministry experience into consideration; (2) A day off during the week to focus on family; (3) At least one continuing education conference/opportunity per year paid for by the church; (4) A library/ministry expense reimbursement plan so that he can keep sharp by having access to quality resources; (5) A benefits package that includes healthcare and retirement; (6) Expecting no more of his wife and children than are expected of any other faithful church member; (7) A commitment that the church will minister alongside him, **and to him**, not expecting him to simply minister to them.

Questions for Reflection:

What resources are needed to help our pastor maintain peak effectiveness in all areas of life?
What are the ways we can minister alongside our pastor?

Mistake #10 – Presenting an unclear picture of the church and community

The problem here is a lack of mission focus and, in some cases, a lack of basic integrity.

The stories are legion. The pastor search team tells the pastoral candidate, *“We are ready to move forward. We need to change. We are looking for God’s man to lead us into the next chapter in the life of our church.”* So, the pastor is called to the church, and just about the time he gets his boxes unpacked, he finds out that ***the only people who are ready to move forward are the 5 people on the pastor search team.***

What do these phrases mean: *“We really love each other and have a great fellowship” ... “We are mission-minded” ... “We have a great heritage” ... “We have great potential.”* Or how about this one: *“We believe we would really take off if we had the right pastor.”*

While most churches are not deliberately deceitful, there are at least a couple of reasons why they sometimes give an unclear picture of the church. ***One is that they are afraid if they present a clear picture, they won’t be able to find a pastor.*** So without telling untruths, they just don’t tell the whole truth. It would be really refreshing sometime to hear a pastor search team say, *“We are in a challenging time. We have no vision and unity is fading. But those of us on this team are committed to doing whatever it takes to get this church refocused on its mission. Here are some of our challenges ...”*

A second reason that an unclear picture is sometimes given is that the pastor search team really has no idea what is going on inside the church or in the community. They haven’t listened to

the people. They haven't studied their community. They haven't accessed available resources to help them get a clear picture of where they are and what skill/gift set is going to be needed in a pastor to help them refocus on God's preferred vision.

Recommendation - Develop a profile of the church and of the pastor by means of survey, listening, and reporting.

A profile of the church may be developed by using surveys, town hall meetings, and listening sessions. There are also tools designed specifically for measuring the church's self-perception in terms of basic church functions. The church may also want to engage a consultant to help with this process (an intentional interim/transitional pastor will also have some training in this area). If the church does not see itself clearly, a new pastor will face an uphill battle trying to engage people in ministry.

Demographic resources are also available for churches to help them get a clearer picture of their communities. Failing to understand the community will result in the church's having few ministry connection points to minister to people.

When developing a pastoral profile, the church should not simply ask what church members are looking for in a pastor. The church should ask what skills/gifts are needed based on the church's understanding of its current state and that of the surrounding community.

Questions for Reflection:

What are the greatest challenges facing our church right now? What are our greatest resources?
How well do we understand the culture around us? What do we need to learn?