

by Wade Hodges

BEFORE YOU GO



QUESTIONS
EVERY PASTOR MUST ASK
BEFORE MOVING TO A NEW CHURCH

CHEMISTRY  STAFFING

Introduction: I Didn't Sign Up for This!

In 2003, when I accepted a call to a new church, I believed I was stepping into a ministry with tremendous potential. After being there for less than a year, I found myself in a quagmire of conflict and financial turmoil. A key staff member, someone who was crucial to my effectiveness there, resigned unexpectedly. The leadership team that looked so healthy during the interview started manifesting old dysfunctions that we all hoped had been exorcised. I was angry and disappointed. Angry at the leadership team for falling apart and disappointed in myself for getting caught up in such a volatile church system. As the situation continued to unravel, and as each month presented yet another unsolvable problem, I repeatedly said to myself, "I didn't sign up for this!"

Since then, I've spent a lot of time thinking about how I ended up in such a difficult situation. Hindsight is supposed to be 20-20, but my perspective on what happened, and why, is still a bit fuzzy. I can, however, make several observations. First, I was desperate to leave the church I was working with when I began the interview process with the new church. I knew I would accept the job if they offered it to me. Second, there were a number of important questions I failed to ask throughout the process. I either didn't ask these questions because of inexperience or because I didn't want to know the answer. Desperate people don't ask questions they don't want to know the answers to. Third, the most important questions that needed to be asked were not questions about the church, but questions about myself. Changing churches didn't change me. I was the same guy in both places and that was part of the problem.

This is a resource for ministers thinking about moving to a new church. You may be in the early stages of sending out resumes or you may be on the verge of saying "yes" to the church of your dreams. You may be as desperate to move someplace new as I was, or you may be a rookie hoping to land a job with your first church. My hope is that what follows will give you some good questions to help you discern whether to make a move. Most of these questions are the product of mistakes I've made over fourteen years of ministry. A few come from carefully observing the mistakes of others. If you can learn from our mistakes, maybe you'll have more freedom to venture into uncharted territory and make a few new mistakes of your own.

This can also be a valuable resource for search teams who are looking to call a new minister to their church. I hope this will give you a sense of the kind of questions that should surface during the search process.

A Word To The Desperate And Lovesick

“They say love is blind; it is also deaf, dumb, and stupid.”

-Jaded Cynic

“The girls all get prettier at closing time.”

-Mickey Gilley

I used to hate doing premarital counseling and so did the first few couples I counseled. That’s because I didn’t understand the purpose of the exercise. I assumed the couple sitting in my office wanted my help deciding whether they should get married. My philosophy was that if they survived six sessions with me then they were truly meant for each other. It took me a few cycles to realize that their decision had already been made. They were in love and they were going to get married no matter what we talked about in our sessions together.

So I dropped the “bad cop” persona and shifted my approach. Instead of trying to talk them out of getting married, I adopted the more modest goal of attempting to float a few decent questions in front of their lovesick eyes, hoping they would enter their marriage with at least one realistic expectation. My questions never convinced a couple to break their engagement, but it did help a few of them entertain the possibility that marriage was not going to be a never-ending co-ed slumber party.

I’ve adopted the same approach in this book. I know how easy it is for both the church and the prospective minister to emerge from a search process with unrealistic expectations of each other. The best way to clarify expectations is to ask good questions. This doesn’t always happen because some ministers show up at the interview wanting the job so badly they subconsciously avoid the best (and hardest) questions. Some young ministers want to ask the right questions, but lack the experience to know what to ask.

You may be in love. You may be desperate. You may have already made your decision. I’m not going to try to talk you out of it. But I am hoping to sneak a few good, hard questions into the conversation so that you have a chance at making your decision with clear eyes and an open mind.

If we were having coffee and you were telling me about the new position you are about to accept, these are the questions I would ask to help you finalize your decision and clarify your expectations.

I'm Not Suspicious, I Just Don't Trust Anyone, Including Myself

“Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not out to get you.”

-Name Withheld for Privacy

I have a friend who has helped me sort through a lot of the junk I carry around in my head. In one conversation, I summarized an emotionally painful situation and asked for his help in making sense of it. He warned me that his tendency was to gravitate to the darkest interpretation possible, especially when addressing a situation in which self-deception was likely. He then helped me see that much of my emotional pain was the result of thinking more highly of myself than I should.

Much of what you're about to read gravitates toward the “darkest interpretation possible” of what happens in the minister search process. Most churches deceive themselves about how healthy they are. Most ministers deceive themselves about how capable they are. *Too many interviews boil down to two self-deceived parties trying to convince each other of how much they can accomplish if they work together.*

While it's vital to maintain a sense of hope that God can accomplish great things through every church and every minister, there is too much at stake to assume the best about the church you're interviewing (and remember--you're interviewing them just as much as they're interviewing you). This decision will impact your finances, your family, and your faith. Avoid cynicism. Use suspicion sparingly. But for the sake of everyone involved, square up with reality and ask the tough questions about the church and yourself. You may not always like the answers, but the truth will set you free to make better decisions.

How To Read This Book

“Asking the right questions is more important than knowing all the answers.”
-Someone Smart

This is a book of questions.

A few of them are questions you might actually ask during the interview. Most will be questions that need to be working in the background of your mind as you navigate the search process. Some of the answers to these questions will come from within and some will be the result of listening carefully and reading between the lines. Some will require some behind-the-scenes investigation.

I’ve also included a few bonus questions especially for young ministers. Young ministers need to be almost as careful picking their first church as they are in picking their first spouse.

I’ve written this with “free agent” ministers in mind. These are ministers who are free to move from congregation to congregation depending on the call of God and size of the salary.

I use the terms “preacher,” “minister,” and “pastor” interchangeably. I’ll also be switching between “Elders” and “The Board” in reference to the church’s governing body. I’ll alternate between the language of being “called” and being “hired” to maintain the tension between the two. Sometimes I say “church” and sometimes I say “congregation” just for the heck of it.

My list of questions isn’t intended to be definitive. I haven’t included the usual list of questions that most consultants recommend asking during an interview. You can find those by doing a quick Google search. If you think of an important question that I’ve overlooked and need to include, email me at beforeyougo@wadehodes.com and I’ll consider adding your question to the mix. If I use your question, I’ll mention your name in a footnote in future additions. If you find a typo, email it to me and I’ll fix it and give you a footnote as well.

A Few Navel-Gazing Questions About Yourself

“The longer I gaze at my navel the more I realize how much lint is in there.”

-Someone Trying to be Funny

“Eighty-five percent of the process of finding an authentic fit in your career comes from looking inward. We often put the cart before the horse by searching for the hottest opportunities without making sure they’re right for us.”

-Dan Miller

How will you be different in your new church?

When you have the opportunity to move to a new church, it is easy to believe that changing circumstances will make everything better. This is usually not the case, because as the old saying goes: Wherever you go, there you are. The question that gets lost amid the excitement over how the new church will be better than the one you’re leaving is: How will you be different? It's common for preachers to change churches multiple times throughout their career and each time think the next church will be different. After a few years they find themselves in the same place they were at with their old church even though the two churches aren't exactly the same.

Changing your circumstances has a limited effect if you’re not also changing yourself. If you were always discontent at your old church because the people were stuck in their ways, you may find yourself discontent at your new church for a completely different reason. Discontented people can always find something to be bothered about.

I've worked with three very different churches: a small church in the Pacific Northwest, a medium sized church in Oklahoma, and a church plant in Texas. No matter the setting or the size of the church, there were three constants: my strengths, my weaknesses, and my “issues.” When I left Oklahoma and came to Texas to plant a church, I believed that my biggest problem was that I wasn't suited to work in established churches and would therefore have a different ministry experience in a start-up environment. Instead, I learned that the same guy who burned out on ministry in Oklahoma was the same guy who showed up in Texas to plant a church. I realize now that the biggest mistake I made in the transition is that I didn't do the necessary inner work to have a shot at being a new and improved version of myself when I started my new ministry.

I can think of several situations where a change in scenery was all that a person needed to flourish. But most of the time, if we don't change who we are when we move on to something new, the only thing that’s going to be different is our zip code.

Are you willing to work at being different?

It doesn't do much good to ask the question of how you'll be different in your new place if

you're not willing to actually do the work.

It's not enough to sit down and make a list of all the things you want to change about yourself and then promise to do a better job at the new church. That's just piling another layer of good intentions on the highway to hell. You've got a better shot at changing if you sit down with a spiritual director, counselor, or trusted friend with an acute BS (Baloney Sandwich!) detector and ask him to help identify your blind spots. I have a friend who has helped me identify some dark parts of my personality that, if left unchanged, or at least unmanaged, will keep leading me to the same dead end no matter what path I take. This was work I should have done several years ago, but I wasn't ready to do it until I got tired of running into the same old me in every new thing I tried.

I'm not sure I can ever change some of the negative traits I've recently discovered. But now, at least, they have a name. To pluck a principle from demonology: to know a spirit's name is to have control over that spirit. While not curing me of my biggest foibles, having the self-awareness to name them has given me a better shot at managing them. If I were about to start a new job--whether with a church or at a local bait stand--I have a much better shot of giving an honest answer to how I'll be different this time around than I had two years ago. (I'm not claiming to have all my blind spots figured out and fixed. I've got a long way to go.)

Bottom line: *if you are contemplating a move and haven't done the necessary inner work to know how to be different in your new setting, you're not ready to move on, no matter how convinced you are that this new ministry opportunity will change everything.* Changing churches will not break your addiction to pornography, wipe out your overwhelming credit card debt, or put a cap on your volcanic temper. No matter how great your new church is--and it may be wonderful--there is just one thing wrong with it: you'll soon be in the middle of it. It would be a shame to show up and mess it up because you don't know the names of your biggest weaknesses.

Why not go ahead and meet yourself where you are now instead of where you're about to be?

Can you love the church as it is?

Here's one way to test your love for the church you're interviewing:

1. Make a list of all the things about the church that you'd like to change once you get there.
2. Now look at the top three items on your list and assume those things will never change. No matter how long you're there or how hard you try, these changes will never happen.
3. If you can't stand the thought of these things never changing, and if you don't think you could ever really love and serve a church that couldn't embrace these changes, don't go.

Because it's likely that the things you most want to change about your new church will be the

hardest things to change. If you can't love the church as it is without these changes ever happening, then you have no business going there. You'll be miserable and you'll make them miserable by trying to change them into the kind of church you want them to be.

Just as it's always a bad idea to marry someone with the hope she will change after the wedding, it's also unwise to talk yourself into taking a ministry job because you see the potential for a church to change once you get there. If you don't love her for who she is before the wedding, don't go through with the ceremony. You're setting yourself up for a frustrating journey if you do.

I'm not saying your new church can't or won't change while you're there. Churches change all the time. But the best changes in a church won't be forced by the new preacher who moves into town with an agenda. *They will be led by the Holy Spirit and may take both the preacher and the church by surprise.* "We didn't see that coming!" is not necessarily an admission of visionless leadership. It could be a declaration that the Holy Spirit is at work in the church.

Assuming that many of the changes you would want to bring to your new church will never happen will not only help you figure out if you can love the church as it is, it may also put you in a position to be delighted by the unpredictable moves of the Holy Spirit.¹

Warning: Embracing this principle might also lead you to stay at your current church and start loving it.

Can you leave your ideal church behind?

It's common for a preacher to go to a church with an "ideal" church in his head and then try to change it into his ideal whether it wants to become that kind of church or not.

One of the biggest mistakes I made as a young preacher was that I was driven by a desire to turn the churches I was serving into churches I could be proud of working with, because at the time they didn't measure up to my ideals. At times I had the attitude that the churches I was working with weren't worthy of having me as their preacher unless they changed into the kind of churches I thought they should be. The result was that I was miserable most of the time and so were they. Our shared misery was more the result of my arrogance than their hard-hearted resistance to change. I don't blame them for not responding to my leadership. They didn't trust me because they didn't believe I really loved them. I said that I loved them, but the truth is I didn't love them as they were, I loved them for who I thought they could be if they would do things my way. No wonder my effectiveness was limited.

If you are going to lead change in your church, it must be change that is Spirit-led, not just driven by your preferences to be the minister at your ideal church. It's not that I don't think

¹ Thanks to Houston Heflin for catching a typo here.

churches need to make a lot of changes. They do and in time they will. But they need to be lead by ministers who love them as they are and not for who they could be someday after making a bunch of necessary changes.

Can you love the church the way God loves you? It's God's love and acceptance of us, just as we are, that empowers us to change in healthy and beautiful ways. When the gospel is distorted, and the order is reversed, and we're told that God's love and acceptance are withheld until we change, it not only turns change into something ugly and unnatural, it also decreases the chances that anything will ever really change.

What are you talking yourself into in order to say yes?

In an episode of the TV Show "Blue Bloods," Police Commissioner Frank Reagan says, "*That's the thing about decisions. You usually don't have to talk yourself into making the right one.*"

Several years ago my wife and I were really struggling to make a decision about whether or not to work with a church that was inviting us to join their team. We were in the middle of a very difficult ministry in Tulsa. We were tired and ready to leave, or so we thought, and we were working hard to find reasons why the church we were interviewing would be a great fit for us. We never developed any peace about going and ultimately decided against it. But we almost talked ourselves into it, even though there were a number of things about the church that bothered us. We both agree now that it would have been a terrible decision.

What are you talking yourself into in order to say "yes" to this new opportunity? Is it:

- that the church will do a better job inviting their neighbors, even though in the past they haven't invited hardly anyone?
- that the Elders will do a better job shepherding the congregation than they have in the past?
- that you'll eventually get used to their worship style which has bothered you every time you've visited?
- that the church's finances will improve once they have a preacher delivering a consistent message on Sunday morning?

On the other hand, *if you're trying to talk yourself out of going (or staying), then the hesitation in your heart may be pointing the way forward.* I recently had to make a tough decision. In the broad scheme of things, it wasn't that big of a deal, but I was struggling with it. I realized I was trying to talk myself out of doing the right thing. Many times the right thing to do is the harder thing to do. Indecision becomes a disguise for trying to talk ourselves out of doing the right thing.

We usually don't have to talk ourselves into the right decisions, but sometimes we try to talk ourselves out of doing what's right.

How many times in Scripture do we see the prophets trying to talk God (or themselves) out of their call? I can't think of an example of a legitimate prophet talking himself into believing he's been called by God. It seems a true test of a prophet's call is that he tries to talk God out of it. Then again, most prophets were called into some terribly difficult ministries. No wonder they didn't want to go.

Some ministers go to a new church because they talk themselves into believing it is a great opportunity, often because they're desperate to leave their current church. Some ministers go to a new church because they couldn't talk themselves (or God) out of the idea that it was the right place for them to be, even though they really didn't want to leave their current church.

Which one are you?

Here's a maxim to try on for size:

We talk ourselves into bad decisions; we talk ourselves out of good ones.

A Few Questions About The Church's Vision

“Where there is no vision the people perish.”

-Proverbs 29:18

“Where there is an unrealistic vision the people are perpetually disappointed and blame their leaders for not making their dreams come true.”

-2nd Opinions 5:3

“The definition of potential is that you haven't done anything yet.”

-Bill Parcells

How realistic is the vision of the church?

Many churches suffer from organizational grandiosity. They think more highly of themselves than they should. They believe they're the next Willow Creek, North Point, or Mars Hill. They have an exciting vision and strategy in place to help them become the church of God's dreams. The only thing they lack is the right pastor to lead them to the Promised Land.

It's a huge ego boost to have a search team tell you they think you're God's chosen one for helping their church become all it can be. But resist the temptation to buy into their vision, and your cherished place within it, long enough to assess just how realistic it is.

One way to assess their vision is to investigate its source:

- Where did their grand vision come from? Is it a holdover from the last pastor? If yes, then why didn't he stay to bring it to fulfillment?
- Is it based on another church's success in reaching out to a different demographic in a different region? What works in Seattle may not work in Little Rock.
- Has it been inspired by a current trend, fad, or popular conference? Remember when every church believed the key to unlimited growth was a dynamic small group ministry?
- To what degree does the vision take into account the church's surrounding community, strengths, weaknesses, history, and traditions?

A vision that isn't rooted in these realities is setting the church up for chronic disappointment, which will be directed at the pastor who lets himself be talked into believing he is the only one capable of helping them achieve a vision that even God thinks is impossible.

How much do they compare themselves to other churches in the same city?

I once got a call from the leader of a search team at a church inviting me to interview to be their next preacher. We had several phone conversations during which we both tried to discern if we should go deeper into the process. By the third conversation I noticed a pattern. When he spoke about the vision of the church he always compared it to the success of another church across town:

- We want to reach out to our community like Church X has.
- We want to attract young families like Church X.
- We want to have a thriving small group ministry like Church X.
- We want to help people recover from addictions like they do at Church X.

It made me want to hang up and go ask Church X for a job.

Everything he said his church wanted to do and become was shaped by the ministry of Church X. It's a common progression. A struggling church sees another church across town flourishing and begins to wonder, "Why can't that same thing happen to us? We live in the same city. We drink the same water. We're not that different, are we?" Before long they can't talk about their future without mentioning Church X.

When a church does this, it's a sign they haven't developed their own vision based on what kind of church God is calling them to be. They're borrowing another church's vision and this rarely works. While they might be talked out of imitating a church somewhere across the country, the desire to compete with and become like a church just down the road can be overwhelming.

If they could be like the church down the street they would have already done it. *You're probably not going to be able to move in and help them become something they're not.*

Do they frame their vision in terms of what kind of church they don't want to be?

If instead of trying to imitate another church, all they do is talk about how they don't want to be like all the other churches in town, that's not a good sign either. You can't build a healthy vision on a list of all the things you don't want to be.

Many times, a church in transition will have to go through a deconstructive process where they reflect on their past and say, "We don't want be like that anymore." That's good and helpful, up to a point.

Eventually, they've got to stop moving away from what they don't want to be and start pursuing a vision framed by the positive characteristics God is calling them to embody in their community. It's amazing how many churches never fully make this transition.

During the interview, your first act of leadership may be to help them see that while they're

doing a great job of describing what they want to avoid, they do not yet have a clear picture of what they're moving toward.

At the same time, it is also important for you to make sure you're able to articulate your personal vision for ministry in terms of what kind of minister you are gifted to be rather than listing all the things you can't or won't do well.

Is the church's progressive theology blinding you to its practical dysfunctions?

OK, I know "progressive theology" is a loaded term. For the purpose of this discussion, let's say that progressive theology means that the church you're interviewing is more open or flexible than your current church on one or more theological issues.

A progressive theological transition usually comes at great cost to the congregation. They don't move forward with consensus support from the congregation. They create winners and losers. There are financial implications. Sometimes the "winners" are so focused on pressing for change that they neglect changing themselves (i. e. Discipleship). The result can be a congregation of theologically progressive individuals who are struggling to hold their lives together. They'll give you the freedom to try just about anything; just don't expect them to be of much help.

Make sure you're not letting the church's progressive theology blind you to some of the pastoral challenges you'll face there. You may feel theologically stuck in your current church, but with stuck-ness comes stability. Are you willing to trade that stability for progressive theology? It may seem like a no-brainer during the interview, but the joy of marching under the banner of progressive theology is muted when you find yourself leading a group of people who are more interested in being progressive than in being a church.

A Few Questions About the Church's Leadership Culture

“There are twenty-one reasons why there are twenty-one principles behind the twenty-one laws of leadership.”

-A John Maxwell Fan

“Followers cannot rise above the maturity level of their mentors no matter what their mentor's skill and knowledge base.”

-Edwin Friedman

What is the hiring process telling you about how the church makes decisions?

Pay attention to their process and it will tell you a lot about the people running it.

Some churches take forever to make a hire. (What is taking them so long?)

It could be that they're disorganized and don't have anyone leading the process. (Why hasn't someone stepped up to lead it?)

It could be that they're being careful and not wanting to move too fast. (Will they want to move this slowly on all decisions?)

It could be that they're following a democratic model and it takes them a long time to get feedback from all the voices speaking into the process. (Will they take a vote on everything?)

Maybe there is disagreement over what kind of minister they want to hire. (What other looming disagreements are out there?)

Maybe it's taking longer than expected to rework the budget. (Rework the budget? Just how much money are they spending on building maintenance?)

While some churches seem to take forever to complete the interview process, you'll occasionally run into a church that is ready to offer you the job after one interview. Most ministers prefer a faster process, so it is easy to be seduced by a church that makes a quick hiring decision. I would be more cautious of a church that moves too fast than one that moves too slow. (If they pressure you to respond to their offer by giving you an unreasonable deadline, put your wallet in your front pocket and keep your eye on the exits.)

Why are they moving so fast? Maybe they're decisive. They know what they want and are ready to take action when they see it. (This is the church of your dreams!)

Maybe they're anxious. Maybe they're rushing the process because they feel pressure from the congregation to make a quick hire. (What does it say about a leadership that is so easily

pressured by the congregation? What does it say about a congregation that panics at the thought of being without a preacher for more than a couple of months?)

Moving quickly may be a sign that a small group of opinion leaders are ramrodding the process. (Are they running over the other search team members? Do you want to enter a church on the wave of a process that caused several from the search team to give up and leave?)

Maybe they're moving fast because they want to have someone in place before the new school year starts. (How considerate! You hate moving your kids in the middle of the school year.)

Maybe they're moving fast because they're afraid if they don't snatch you up while you're available, someone else will. (You'd love to believe that wouldn't you?)

What do the questions they're asking tell you about their values?

In the first interview I ever had with a church, the very first question asked after the opening prayer was: What do you think about leadership roles for women in the church?

Both the question and its timing told me a lot about the woman who asked it. First, the timing told me she was anxious. Forget about the easy, let-us-get-to-know-you questions, let's cut to the chase and get to the most pressing issue.

Second, it was obviously an issue of great importance to her. To understand why it was important would require some extra digging. Was she concerned because the church was moving too fast on this issue or was she frustrated that it was moving too slow? Was this her personal concern or was she voicing a concern on behalf of the search team or maybe the entire church? Instead of fumbling through an answer I wish I'd had the presence of mind to say something like, "Wow, that's quite a way to begin. I'm guessing that's been a hot-button topic around here?"

What do these questions tell you about the values of those asking them?

How many hours do you plan to be in the office during the week?

How long do your sermons usually last?

Who was the last person you lead to Christ?

Why are you a Christian?

How do you see yourself working with the Elders?

How often and how long do you pray?

How much has your last church grown since you've been there?

Can you fill out our thirty-page doctrinal questionnaire?

What is the last big mistake you made in ministry and what did you learn from it?

What does your family find to be the most challenging about professional ministry?

What do you do to keep from burning out?

What are some ways your spouse assists you in your ministry?

What marketing ideas do you have that will help our church grow?

I've had friends pull out of a search process simply because they knew from the questions the church was asking that it wasn't going to be a good fit.² The questions you're asked will tell you just as much about those asking the questions as your answers will tell them about you.

Who are the opinion leaders of the congregation?

Every team or group has a leader. One or two Elders will exercise more influence than the others. The stated leader of the search team may not be the actual leader of the search team. The most influential person in the church may not even be a part of the search process. In every church there are a handful of opinion leaders who will make or break your ministry. If you are not able to build alliances with them, your effectiveness will be limited. If they don't embrace you as their pastor, you won't last.

It's your job to figure out who these opinion leaders are before you take the job. Once you figure out who the leaders are, don't hesitate to schedule some one-on-one time with each person to explore what it might be like to work together. Don't be surprised if they take the initiative and schedule a meeting before you can suggest it. That is what leaders do.

Helpful hint: If a group tells you they don't have a leader, the one who makes the strongest case for not having a leader is probably the leader.

Do the Elders and staff tithe?

Find a slick way to weave this question into the interview and you will learn a lot in a hurry.

First, you'll learn how committed the leadership is to the mission of the church. If they're not

² Thanks to Kent Rogers for catching a typo here.

tithing, then not very. They're going to expect you to give a couple of sermons on tithing and stewardship each and every year. Wouldn't it be great to know that the leadership is practicing what they're forcing you to preach?

Second, you'll see how transparent the leadership is about personal finances. Are they willing to talk about it or are they embarrassed by the conversation?

Third, you'll be letting them know that you're not afraid to ask difficult questions and hold the leadership accountable to its commitment to support the church's mission. This question will help you find out if they want you to play this role on their team.

Please don't be a goober and ask this question if you're not tithing at your current church.

What do the Elders say about the other members of the staff when they are not present?

It's appropriate to visit privately with the Elders about the current staff, especially if you'll be their supervisor. How the Elders talk about the "help" (their word, not mine) will tell you a lot about whether they see them as interchangeable cogs in a ministry machine or as human beings and fellow Christ-followers. Whatever attitude the Elders display about the other members of the staff is the same attitude they have toward you.

Also pay attention to how they talk about the previous pastor. It will give you a pretty good idea of how they'll talk about you someday too.

How much past conflict has the church endured?

The biggest casualty of poorly managed conflict is the congregation's leadership culture. The more blood stains you find on the carpet the fewer capable leaders you'll find in the church. Every conflict, every split, and every mass departure for another congregation peels off another layer of leadership.

It doesn't matter which side of the conflict the leaders were on. Both the winners and losers often leave after the dust settles. The winners who do stay are either left sitting comatose in the pews or are so addicted to conflict that they can't help but stir up more trouble in the future.

Repetitive conflict will also prompt the up-and-coming leaders on the periphery of the congregation to bolt. Even though they may not have been directly involved in any of the trouble, they get tired of watching the church shoot itself in the foot and eventually leave in search of a church that isn't always fighting about something.

Sometimes, a church that has fought all the necessary battles and finally "arrived" has a limited future because its best leaders didn't survive the trip.

A Few Questions About Your (Un)Stated Job Description

“Dear Lord, there is a real good chance our next preacher is going to turn out to be human. Please don’t let us be too disappointed.”

-Prayer from a Search Team Member

How do you compare to their last pastor?

The longer the tenure and the greater the popularity of the previous pastor, the more attention you have to pay to this question. If you're radically different in personality, style, and training than a beloved, long-time pastor, it's going to be a challenge to connect with your new congregation.

If he was with the church for more than ten years, then he has trained the church to expect certain things from their pastor. If longer than 20 years, then he has defined the role of pastor for whoever succeeds him. The church will know what it knows about pastors from him.

Spend some time analyzing how you compare to him in the following areas:

- Leadership Style
- Sunday Attire
- Education
- Sermon Length and Style
- Personality: Introvert or Extrovert
- Philosophy of Ministry: Seeker-Sensitive, Missional, or Traditional

You don't have to be a cookie cutter imitation. Difference is good, but if you are radically different from him in most ways, then it is going to take the church some time to get used to you and you will get tired of hearing how you're not living up to their expectations.

Some of the critiques will be annoying because they'll make little sense apart from how you're being compared to your predecessor. If he preached topical sermons and you only preach expository sermons, there will be people who will think your preaching is not as biblical as his because you only reference one passage in your sermon and he used 10 or 15 verses from all over the Bible. Depending on your levels of education, he may have spoken about the Christian faith in a different theological language than you do. The church may be suspicious of all the new words you're using. I have a friend who has been repeatedly criticized for dressing more casually on Sunday mornings than the last guy did. It drives him crazy, but not crazy enough to put on a tie.

These differences aren't unmanageable, but the wider the gap, the more frustration you will experience early on as the church gets used to (and complains about) your different way of doing things.

How much is the current job description a response to their last preacher?

I love reading the job descriptions churches include in the information packets sent out to potential candidates. If you read between the lines, you can get a good idea of what their last preacher was like because many are written as a response to his shortcomings.

If the description emphasizes that the new minister will “keep regular office hours” that means the old preacher would disappear on a golf course for days at a time. If it says the new minister will “handle the Word of God appropriately in his sermons” that means their last guy would wave at the Bible on his way to whatever new self-help principle he learned from Dr. Phil earlier that week.

Assuming that the search team is taking the job description seriously, it might be a good idea to sit down with them and ask them what motivated the inclusion of any idiosyncratic details. It won't take long to figure out how much of the new job description can be summarized into one bullet point: Don't be like our last preacher!

This could lead to a great conversation about how you'd rather not have your job description defined by your predecessor. Instead, you could suggest helping to write a new one that makes the most of your strengths and is realistic about your weaknesses.

What are they postponing until you arrive?

Beware of churches that say: We're saving that for when the new minister gets here. This statement is similar to “Let's work on that after the holidays.” With the last bite of dessert from Thanksgiving dinner comes an excuse to put off projects, meetings, and conversations until after the first of year. In the same way, once churches enter “minister search” mode they give themselves permission to put off doing important tasks until they find a new minister.

If during the interview the answer to more than one-and-a-half questions about the church is “Well, we're not sure about that. We've decided to table that issue until the preacher gets here,” proceed with caution. This answer will boost your sense of importance and give you the impression that they're going to give you immediate power and influence to shape the church's future. You will be tempted to interpret this as a huge opportunity to come in and start putting your thumbprint on the church's identity. **DON'T FALL FOR IT!**

There are several reasons why you don't want to work for a church that is willing to put off important work until they hire a new preacher.

First, it indicates that they are putting too much stock in your ability to get them to do things they haven't already been able to do without you. You're not that good. Few ministers are. Don't

believe otherwise.

Second, by asking you to help them do something they haven't been able to do by themselves, you're being cast as a potential scapegoat for a pre-existing problem. Let's imagine a church that hasn't grown in the past few years puts its outreach strategy on hold until they hire a preacher. The assumptions behind this postponement are (1) that they're not capable of doing successful outreach without a minister and (2) it is the minister's job to grow their church.

So what happens if after you implement your outreach strategy the church still fails to grow? What becomes the new problem to be solved? That's right: it's you. Be skeptical of a church that says they desperately want to grow, but is willing to put off acting on their stated desire until they find a minister.

Which kind of church would you rather serve: one that is reaching out and growing without you (or at least is trying to do so) or one where everything has ground to a halt because they can't imagine anyone visiting, enjoying, or joining their church as long as they are without someone like you?

Third, it means they have given away to an outsider too much of their power to act. They're placing too much hope in the idea that the new preacher will be a solution to their problems. *A church that starts solving its problems before the preacher arrives demonstrates that the people are taking responsibility for the ministry of the church, instead of putting all of their hope in someone they haven't even met yet.* It also means they realize it may take longer to find the right preacher than they originally thought, and they know they can't afford to put the church's mission on hold for an extended period of time.

Some churches postpone articulating a vision until after they find a new minister. What if the new preacher comes in with a vision that the church doesn't embrace? A healthier option is for the church to start discerning their vision before beginning the search process. They don't have to finalize or wordsmith it. The new preacher can help put the finishing touches on it as a way of owning it. If the basic vision work has already been done, the minister has a better idea of what he is getting into and the church has a better idea of what kind of minister will be best equipped to help them flesh out their vision.

The ideal situation is to go to a church that is demonstrating its ability to function as the Body of Christ quite nicely without you. When the church begins to say, "I'm not sure we even need a preacher. Look how well we're getting along without one!" they're ready to bring one on board. That's also the kind of church a wise preacher is ready to serve.

Are there some issues that can be legitimately postponed until the preacher arrives? Yes. Here are a few that come to mind:

- The color of the walls in his office.
- The neighborhood in which he will live.

- Where his kids will go to school.
- Which email and phone number he puts on his business card.
- The type of wireless headset microphone to buy so that his head appears to be neither too big nor too small while preaching.

That's about it. I see no reason why a church shouldn't at least start to work on all its other problems long before they hire a preacher.

One more thing: Sometimes the business they're putting off is unpleasant. It could be a staff member that needs to be released or a necessary programming change that may be unpopular with some of the congregation. Why would you want to use up most of your initial leadership capital leading the charge on unpleasant issues that the leadership team knew needed to be addressed long before you arrived? The more unpleasant business you inherit from a weak leadership team the shorter your honeymoon will be.

What is the existing leadership structure and do you understand your place within it?

Leadership structures vary from church to church. Some are pulled straight out of a denominational handbook, some reflect the personality and biases of the founding pastor, and some are unwritten because everyone knows how things work... because that's the way it's always been done. No matter the source of the structure, you'll want to make sure you know your place within it.

I once had a conversation with my Elders about the limits of what I could do without their approval. I wanted to know what kind of decisions I needed to bring to their attention and which decisions I could make on my own. One of them said, "Don't worry about that. You do what you think is best and we'll let you know when you go too far." I said no thanks and pressed for a clearer definition of my operational authority. It took a long time to hash out. They found it much easier to whack a minister when he got out of line than proactively define his place in the leadership structure.

Here are a few questions you may want to bring up during the interview:

- To whom will I be accountable? Who has the authority to hire or fire me? Who conducts my performance review? How often do these reviews occur?
- What are the limits of my operational authority? What decisions can I make without first seeking permission from the Board?
- What kind of decisions can only be made by the Elders?
- What does the decision making process for major changes look like?
- Who or what distinguishes between major and minor changes?
- Who is responsible for the hiring, firing, and oversight of ministry and support staff?
- Who approves the yearly budget? Who is accountable for adhering to the approved budget?

This list could go on and on, but the core issue is to make sure you understand and are comfortable with the role you'll be playing in the existing leadership structure. This includes knowing the leadership tasks for which you're responsible and how much authority you'll be given to accomplish them. Many ministers unwittingly find themselves in a dysfunctional leadership system where they're given a demanding job description with no operational authority to accomplish it. This discrepancy won't be taken into account during the yearly performance review.

If you're not comfortable with your role in the leadership structure, think twice before convincing yourself that you can take the job and then change the structure once you get there. The floors of many a church conference room are sticky with the blood of ministers who attempt such a coup. It's not worth it. If you're not comfortable with the leadership structure as it is, don't go.

If the leadership structure has recently been revamped and you'll be the first minister to function in the "new and improved" system, make sure the church has been informed by the leadership team about the way your role will change in the new structure. Otherwise you may find yourself caught in between the differing expectations of the Elders and the congregation.

What are the motives of the person who picks you up at the airport?

If I could dispense one piece of quirky advice to someone about to move to a new church it would be this:

Pay attention to the person who picks you up at the airport.

Because there is a good chance that the person who picks you up at the airport will be the first person to oppose, betray, or be openly critical of you.

He may be picking you up because he's the leader of the search team and feels that you are beholden to him since he's the one most responsible for hiring you.³ When you refuse to be recruited to his side of a controversial issue several months later, he'll remind you that you wouldn't have a job if it weren't for him.

She may be there because she's hoping your wife will become her new best friend. She figures that if she is best friends with the preacher's wife, she'll have the inside track on what is really going on in the church. When she and your wife fail to connect, she'll start a whispering campaign against you.

The sweet elderly couple may be there picking you up because they live closest to the airport and

³ Thanks to Michael Mercer for catching a typo here.

have no ulterior motives whatsoever. But you have no way of knowing that and being cautious is better than being blindsided.

This “airport principle” is really just another way of saying that those who are first to befriend you during the interview or when you first arrive at your new church may be doing so for a number of reasons; some more nefarious than others.

It can be especially devastating to rookie ministers when their first “friend” at their first church brings the honeymoon to a screeching halt.

A Few Nitty-Gritty Questions About the Church

“There are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns – the ones we don't know we don't know...”
-Donald Rumsfeld

What is the church's financial situation?

This one seems so obvious, yet it often gets overlooked during the interview. I've made this mistake twice with two churches. The first was with a small church where I was going to be the only full-time staff member. I was twenty-three and it was my first church. It never occurred to me to ask about the church's financial history or current situation. Why would a church be looking to hire a minister if they couldn't pay the bills?

Please don't laugh, it's not polite.

I had been there a couple of years and suddenly we were running out of cash. The treasurer explained the shortfall like this: In between preachers they put the money they would normally pay the preacher into savings. They had been drawing on the savings to help pay my salary the first two years I was there. The money they had saved was almost gone.

When I asked what we were going to do about it, he joked that they had never faced that problem before because past preachers hadn't stayed long enough to completely drain the savings. It was so hilarious I almost punched him.

It was their practice to cycle through preachers and use the interim time to build up their savings. I ruined the cycle by staying too long. I don't know if asking some detailed questions about their financial history would have helped me see this pattern, but not asking meant I never got a chance to find out.

It happened a second time when I moved to a much larger church. It was a church that had come through a very difficult transition and I was so focused on assessing the overall health of the church and the quality of the leadership team that I ignored the financials. I assumed that a church with a huge building and large staff was financially stable.

Stop laughing!

After less than a year, the entire staff had to take a temporary pay cut because of cash flow issues. The rest of my ministry there was plagued with financial difficulty. Again, I don't know if I would have seen it coming had I taken a close look at the books, but I regret not having the chance to find out.

Some preachers shy away from asking detailed financial questions during the interview process because they're afraid it will seem unspiritual and even a little suspicious. But remember this, churches overextend themselves financially just like people do, because the same people who overextend their personal finances make financial decisions for the church.

Look at the books.

What are some of the big theological issues that will surface in the first year or two but never come up in the interview?

One of the biggest issues I faced in the first year of my ministry at a new church surfaced as we were making plans for the worship gathering on the weekend of July 4th. The church's tradition was to give that particular gathering a patriotic slant. When I told the planning team I was uncomfortable presiding over a gathering where the American Flag was going to be featured more prominently than the cross, I had several look at me like I'd just made a case for Communism. A similar tension arose every Memorial Day weekend. I was never comfortable equating the death of American soldiers with the sacrifice Jesus made on the cross.

I found it impossible to keep these convictions private and still be the public leader of worship gatherings at naturally patriotic times of the year. Many in the church also struggled with my apolitical positions during election seasons. I refused to take sides with either political party during my sermons. Most people in the church struggled to understand my idiosyncratic convictions. Not because the people were dumb, but because it was a new perspective and they hadn't been given the luxury of processing it in the warmth of an intellectual greenhouse like seminary.

Most search teams will not know to ask about such issues in the interview because they are unaware of the potential differences between you and the majority of the church. They may want to know what you believe about the legitimacy of speaking in tongues, but they won't think to ask whether you believe the American Flag belongs in the sanctuary. It's likely the flag will show up before the tongues.

Whether you bring up these issues during the interview probably depends on how badly you want the job.

How many people in the church are related to each other?

The smaller the church the more important this question. On one hand, it's great when families attend the same church. On the other hand, it can turn the congregation into a closed system that makes it difficult for outsiders to become insiders. Because names change through marriage it may not always be obvious how people are connected. You won't know unless you ask. If those

who are related are offended by the question, then be glad you asked.

It's also important to pay attention to the relationships on the leadership team and support staff in larger churches. Is one of the administrative assistants an Elder's wife? Is the Youth Minister the son of an Elder? Many churches have adopted staunch nepotism policies that prohibit situations like this for a reason. *And it's not because their past experiments with hiring relatives ended up with everyone living happily ever after.*

A Few Bonus Questions for Young Preachers

“Someone handed me a picture and said, ‘This is a picture of me when I was younger.’ Every picture of you is when you were younger.”

-Mitch Hedberg

“Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young, . . .”

-1 Timothy 4:12

So you’re a young preacher. By that I mean you’re under 30 and about to work with your first or second church. I’ve been hired as a young preacher twice. Being a young preacher has special challenges that will only disappear with age and experience. It also has a distinct advantage. Young preachers make mistakes, say foolish things, and come up with harebrained ideas. So do older preachers. The advantage a young preacher has is that he can blame such things on his youth.

Why are they willing to hire a young preacher?

Most young preachers are so excited to have a church interested in having them be their minister that they don’t consider the reason why.

Is it driven by their financial situation? Young preachers are usually cheaper than older ones, especially if they don’t yet have a family in full bloom.

Are they hoping that by hiring a young preacher they’ll attract young adults of a similar age? Can you think of any churches that have experienced sustained growth simply because they have a young preacher? I can’t either. The biggest limiting factor keeping most churches from growing is not the age of their preacher.

Do they see it as a special ministry of the church to provide a loving environment in which a young preacher can make a few mistakes, get some experience, and learn a few lessons? These churches are wonderful blessings to the Kingdom and to young preachers.

Does the church understand the unique challenges of working with a young preacher?

When a church calls a young preacher it is taking on extra responsibility. The proper care and feeding of a young preacher and his family is a stewardship. How a church treats a young preacher will play a big part in whether he will become an old preacher. Too many churches chew up young preachers and spit out insurance agents.

The church will need to be patient, forgiving, and gentle as you find your way. You’re going to preach some awful sermons, say some unfortunate things, and frustrate the cynical with your

outlandish dreams. You're going to make pronouncements about the way the world works that will embarrass you in ten years. It's okay to apologize for the mistakes you make, but don't ever apologize for being young. Any church that invites you to be their minister while at the same time holding your age against you can't be trusted with your future.

If after the interview you have any doubts about how seriously the church will take its responsibility to you and your family, keep looking for a better opportunity.

How many other young preachers have they worked with in the past and where are they buried?

It's always a great idea to talk to your predecessors about their experiences with the church--no matter what their age--so don't miss the opportunity to find out how the church has treated past ministers. If the past three preachers all worked with the church for two or three years and then left professional ministry to deliver pizzas, mow lawns, or grind stumps you might want to find out why. You may think I'm joking about this, but the way such patterns show up in congregations is spooky.

How long are you willing to wait before they let you lead?

You're young and inexperienced, but full of energy and ready to conquer the world. You just spent thousands of dollars getting a degree that says you know more theory about leading a congregation than anyone else at your new church. Please don't be surprised, or disappointed, when the church refuses to hand you the keys to the bus so that you can drive them anywhere you want to go. (This is a metaphor. They may let you drive the actual church bus, just make sure you've got the proper license for it.)

Some churches abuse young preachers, but some young preachers expect too much out of churches. They're not going to immediately trust you to know what you're doing. You have no track record. They're not going to give you the ability to influence the long-term future of the church when they're not sure you'll stay for more than a couple of years. Youthful idealism can be inspiring and attractive. Youthful arrogance is neither. If they sense you're more interested in using them to fulfill your professional ambitions than in loving them— and maybe even learning something from them— they're going to balk at your vision for achieving global domination.

It will take time. Be patient. Earn their trust by setting a good example and fund your credibility with humility. Eventually, they will let you lead them.

The question you have to ask yourself is how long are you willing to wait? A year? Three? Five?

The right (hard) answer is “as long as it takes.”

Several years ago I was visiting with an older minister whose church was flourishing. After telling him how miserable I was at my current church and how resistant the people were to my leadership, he said, “Hang in there and it will get better. I had to endure twenty-two years of misery at my church before things turned around. Now it’s the church of my dreams.”

Twenty-two years of misery.

That’s a long time to wait. (I couldn’t do it.)

But if you could see his ministry today, you’d say it was worth it.

By the way, *if you ever find yourself in a meeting having to ask for permission to be the leader, you still won’t be the leader, even if they say yes.* It’s much better to wait for them to ask you to lead rather than press the issue and ask for permission.

So How Do You Know When You've Found The Right One?

“Every time I fall in love I feel a little sick to my stomach. I'm going to marry the one who makes me the sickest.”

-Someone Funny

“You'll know when you know.”

-A Four-Time Divorcee

Everything I've written so far may seem like I'm coaching you on to how to tell if a church isn't a good fit, rather than helping you figure out which one is the right fit. Fair enough. I wrote this to help ministers avoid making unwise decisions, due either to lack of information about the church or lack of personal insight.

Still, the question remains: How do you know when you've found the right church and can celebrate saying “yes” to a great new opportunity?

It depends on what we mean by the “right” church. “Right” doesn't mean perfect. It doesn't mean trouble-free. It doesn't mean you won't be in for a few unpleasant surprises a couple of weeks after you've unpacked the moving van.

However . . .

If they have a vision based on an honest assessment of their strengths, weaknesses, and history and you can't help but feel attracted to their vision because of your strengths, weaknesses, and history, then it may be the right church for you.

If it's obvious they're not looking for you to be the solution to their problems, but rather are looking for someone like you to come strengthen their team with your specific gifts, then it may be the right church for you.

If after hearing about their past mistakes, current problems, and potential difficulties, you still feel drawn to them, and maybe even worried that you would forever regret passing on the opportunity to join them on their journey, then it may be the right church for you.

If you sense that you will be loved and accepted as a broken human being who is still trying to figure out how to follow Jesus even though it's your job to stand up and tell others about him, then it may be the right church for you.

If they are diligent in listening to and addressing the concerns of your spouse during the interview process, and if your spouse feels like they “get it,” then it may be the right church for you.

If you sense that the members of the leadership team are the kind of people you would want to be friends with even if you weren't their pastor, then it may be the right church for you.

If you would attend the church even if you didn't work there, then it may be the right church for you.

It's Not All Doom And Gloom

“If ministry is hard, it just means that you are in ministry.”

-Andy Stanley

I've pointed out a number of red flags to watch for, and this might leave you with the impression that you'll never find a church to which you can gladly say “yes.”

The brutal truth is that there are lots of pitfalls and land mines in every church. There are also some wonderful people who will love and support you every step of the way, no matter how hard things get during your tenure as their minister. I've had a couple of difficult ministry experiences that have shaped what I've written here. I've emerged from each experience with a few life-long friends who I wouldn't trade for all the “ideal” churches in the world.

Life in your new church will not be perfect. It will not live up to your expectations. You will be hurt and misunderstood. You will sabotage yourself with silly mistakes and stupid remarks. You'll want to quit numerous times. They'll want you to quit a few times too.

But if you will let go of the fiction that there's an “ideal” situation out there somewhere, and instead learn to appreciate the dashes of hope God sprinkles into your ministry--through the Christ-like people he brings into your life--you may discover that while your new (or existing) ministry will never be perfect, it can exceed your expectations in every way that matters to God.

Conclusion: I Still Didn't Sign Up For This!

“The race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise or wealth to the brilliant or favor to the learned; but time and chance happen to them all.”

-Ecclesiastes 9:11

So what do you do when you find yourself in a situation that isn't even close to what you originally signed up for? You have a couple of options. First, you can leave. If you've got the freedom and flexibility to move on, then get gone. Why remain in a miserable situation one second longer than you have to?

Simple enough: get out of there!

To avoid another hasty departure in the future, however, you have to make sure that the next job you take is exactly as it appears to be during the interview. Get an iron-clad guarantee that things at your new church won't shift once you get there.

This is easy to do.

You'll want to make sure that none of the existing staff is going to suddenly resign or accept a more attractive position elsewhere. You're not signing up for that.

You'll also need to make sure none of the elders, especially the opinion leaders who are in your corner, aren't going to upset the balance of power on the leadership team by being diagnosed with a terminal illness or being killed in a car accident. You're not signing up for that either.

Finally, you'll want to check with a local meteorologist and secure a promise that there won't be any natural disasters occur in the first few years you're there. A tornado or hurricane or brush fire that destroys the building could radically alter your job description and cause you to spend a lot of time doing stuff you didn't sign up for.

Once you get these assurances, you should be ready to step into your new ministry and do exactly what you signed up to do.

See, I told you it was easy.

(If we were having this conversation over coffee, I'd wink, put my cup down, and lean in to emphasize what I'm about to say.)

You can't take the chance out of life. It's important to ask good questions and do your due diligence. It's also important to remember that no matter how careful, smart, or inquisitive you are, “time and chance happen to them all.”

When time and chance happen to you, don't despair, give up, or think that there won't be any time and chance waiting for you in your next church. Instead, look for the courage to persevere through what you didn't sign up for by calling on the power made available to you when you signed up to follow Jesus. He'll meet you in the midst of your disappointment and do his best work. At least that's what he has always done with me.

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