**Help! Our committee is taking too long to find a pastor.**

**By Pastor Joe McKeever**

***“What do we do when the pastor search committee is taking so long that people are leaving? Some of our leaders are panicking.”***

This is not a rare phenomenon. It happens.

The typical Southern Baptist church can expect the search process to take anywhere from 6 months to a year. If the church has unusual circumstances–a terrible reputation, poor finances, a history of infighting, or several candidates in a row have turned the committee down–the process could take longer than expected.

When people start leaving the church because no pastor has been found, seizing the first preacher available and recommending him is the worst of all possible options.

The church leadership should consider the following….

1) If people are flying the coop, it may be those charged with leading the church during the interim period are not doing their job. The church staff should be carrying on a full-scale ministry. No church requires a pastor in order to have a complete slate of children’s activities or youth projects or senior events. If the ministerial staff is sitting on their hands marking time until a new pastor arrives to give them direction, the lay leadership should build a fire under them.

A church must not put off making key decisions “until a new pastor is here.” If something has to be done, get on with it. If the next pastor is mature, experienced, and secure within himself, he will appreciate that the people are doing their work instead of waiting on him to tell them how to tie their shoes (that is, treating them like kindergartners).

2) If the church has a full-slate of programs going and people are still leaving the church during the interim period, usually this means the person filling the pulpit is less than satisfactory. The lay leadership–or the team charged with this responsibility–should consider making changes. Read on.

3) If the pulpit is being filled by a succession of guest preachers and people are jumping ship, the church should consider bringing in an interim pastor to give some stability. One reason people leave is they feel no connection with the person occupying the pulpit. With the right interim pastor, especially a seasoned man of God with many years of service behind him, this can be corrected.

*Question: Where do we find such a minister?* Easy.  Call the churches in your area that have just come through pastorless periods and find out whom they used. By making a few phone calls, you’ll soon know whether this person would be a good match for your church.

The leadership will need to decide whether they want an “interim preacher” or “interim pastor.” The first shows up on Sundays and preaches. The latter may give hands-on leadership to the church and direction to the staff; he may attend staff meetings and conduct prayer meeting and funerals.

The interim preacher gets paid perhaps one-half what the interim pastor will receive. If the interim pastor is on the job every day, his pay should be close to what the previous pastor was receiving.

4) You may need to assemble the church members for a wakeup session. If matters are getting serious in the church–“the natives are becoming restless,” rumors are flying, or people are staying home from church–the worst thing the search committee can do is to abort their search, select a minister “against their better judgement,” and recommend him to the church.

The second worst thing the committee can do is to ignore the murmuring. It must be dealt with.

The best thing they can do is call the congregation into an emergency session to deal with the matter.

*Several things need to be covered in this session.*

–a) The committee chairman and one or two others will need to speak to the membership, giving a report on what they have done, the challenges they have faced, the lessons they have learned, the way they have seen God at work, and also the obstacles they have encountered. The congregation wishes to know why the process is taking so long. So, tell them.

–b) You will want to take questions from the membership. In this case, the chair will respond, although he/she will sometimes direct a question to a member of the committee and let him/her answer. Ideally, this settles the congregation and assures them that all is well.

–c) Finally, and most importantly, the committee needs to call the membership to a renewed commitment to prayer. In the early days of the search, people prayed for the committee’s labors with freshness and intensity. But unless they are continually reminded of the need for prayer–and even given evidence that their prayers are being heard and answered–their enthusiasm wanes after some weeks and months.

–d) I know a church which featured a different member of the search committee each week during the morning worship service. The interim pastor would introduce him or her, the individual would share something about their work and their prayer needs, then the minister would lead the congregation in prayer. This kept the matter before the people.

5. Let’s state the obvious here: in some cases, the process is taking longer than necessary because of inter-committee bickering and disharmony.

Is one person trying to run the committee? Is someone determined to bring in his cousin as the new pastor? Are there personality conflicts? Or, is it simply that the members disagree on the kind of person they should be seeking?

If these matters cannot be worked out so the committee will become of one mind and work in harmony, they should do one of two things:

–a) Bring in an outside consultant (denominational leader? a wise retired pastor whose judgement they respect?) as a mediator and help them get their act together. He would listen to each member of the committee, ask questions, and give counsel. Then, he should disappear and let the committee talk and pray this out.

–b) If they are unable to achieve unity, they should return to the church with a recommendation: “Get another committee.” Even though that will feel like failure and may be interpreted as such by some in the church, it may be the most mature thing they can do in that situation.

**A few final thoughts…**

In some cases, when the search takes longer than it should and the committee keeps getting rejected by ministers in whom they were interested, the problem may be something systemic in the operation of their church. Perhaps pastors found that a little power group in the church calls the shots and they want none of that. Or, the deacons are the authority in the church and pastors are required to work under their oversight.  Maybe several pastors in a row have been run off.

These are unbiblical set-ups which are ready made to dispense grief to new pastors. The kind of pastor you want–a real leader–will want nothing to do with this kind of unholy arrangement.

God bless you in your search. May He use you to do a good and lasting thing for the Kingdom.