

## **Finding your church's next pastor**

by Cory Miller

OKLAHOMA CITY (PD) — Charged with the important task of finding and calling the next spiritual leader for their congregations, one of the mistakes most church search committees make is approaching their assignment with a "secular mindset," according to Scott Phillips, team leader of church and family equipping at the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma (BGCO).

"What churches tend to do, of course, is put their best and brightest on the search committee – professional businessmen, or, usually, people who have been very successful in their career and life," Phillips said. "And [then] they take those same principles that make them successful in the world and try to apply them in a church setting, which is not always appropriate."

Phillips, who has advised hundreds of church search committees over the past four years, said that while some of those "secular" practices are very appropriate – like background checks involving their criminal and financial history – it's drastically different from hiring a new employee or merely making another personnel decision.

"They [search committees] need to realize what they're doing is a spiritual undertaking. It's not mechanical; they aren't hiring a preacher," he said. "In the secular world, there may be many candidates who fulfill the job description. For the church, only God's man can fulfill the calling. They are calling the man who will counsel their children and young couples. This is the person God has called to lead the congregation in fulfilling their God-given mission. "

Phillips said search committees are tasked with one of the most important functions in the life of a church.

For this reason, Phillips advises search committees not to rush into the selection process – even going so far as to suggest they postpone looking at resumes for a few weeks.

"We live in a microwave world, with budget and time constraints. Typically, committees have been willing to kind of go on what they saw and felt rather than really investing time with the candidate," he said.

For the timeline it should take to find a new pastor, he suggests one month for every year the previous pastor was at the church. For instance, if the previous pastor was at the church for six years, it should take at least six months to find a new pastor.

"It's a fascinating statistic that holds true most of the time," he said. "If the church calls a pastor in less than six months, it's probably happening too fast." Especially, he said, if the previous pastor had been there a long time.

"The longer the pastor has been there, the longer they need to take because they need to put some distance between the former pastor and the new pastor," he said.

The first thing Phillips advises search committees to do is prepare spiritually for their assigned task.

"The week after they get elected, people are going to be cornering them to see if they have any resumes," he said.

But Phillips emphasizes to them that "it's more important to get off on a spiritual footing." Therefore, he asks the team to read and pray through a 14-page guide specifically designed to help search committees discern God's will in their task, written by Phillips' BGCO colleague Greg Frizzell. (Available for download online)

Second, he suggests they begin every meeting with a devotional, brought by a different committee member each time.

According to Phillips, doing this re-emphasizes the spiritual nature of their task and helps them focus on seeking God's will and wisdom in the process.

"If you are in prayer and God's Word, God will speak to you through those things," he said. "He will speak to you the things your committee needs to hear."

It also communicates the spiritual undertaking of their task to the congregation. As such, he says, when committees give their reports to the church – which he suggests doing at least every three weeks – they should also share with the church the things God is teaching them through the committee's devotional times.

"What you're communicating is it's a spiritual task," he said. "And even committees do spiritual work."

After the committee is established with a solid spiritual footing, Phillips said, they can then turn to looking for the right man to lead the congregation. He offers several ways to find that "right fit" for your congregation.

The first thing he suggests is contacting a pastor in their state whom they respect and admire.

"One of the things I ask committees is, 'If you could have any pastor in the state, who would you pick?' Then I tell them, 'You ought to call him,'" Phillips said. "They often say, 'He won't come to our church.' In the first place, you don't know. My pastor left a congregation of 600 to go to one of 200. God deals with men in different ways."

If that pastor is not willing to be a candidate, Phillips said, they should ask him to recommend someone.

"Most candidates are still called from a direct reference," he said. "Somebody usually will have referred that candidate to them."

Once the committee has a list of candidates, Phillips said they should be careful about not focusing only on his preaching.

"Hearing him preach is not the first thing you should do. Search committees have a responsibility to build relationships where they can discern if he is the right person," he said. "I'm not saying you shouldn't hear him preach, but that's 30 minutes a week. And you can preach out of the flesh."

Spending time and building a relationship with the candidate is vital, he said, and encourages search committee members to host the candidate and his family in their home when they come to interview.

"You learn a lot about people when they stay in your home," he said.

He also offers that when in the actual interviews that the committees not shy away from asking personal questions.

"If there was ever a time to take a detailed and personal interest, now is the time," he said. "You don't want to wait until something happens to be asking personal questions."

"Ask hard questions. Don't be afraid," he said. "If they're offended, that ought to put a red flag up."

But Phillips said the questions should be asked "in grace."

To assist committees, the BGCO offers an 11-page pastoral questionnaire for free online, Phillip said.

"The pastoral questionnaire in particular is interesting. It looks kind of like a job application, but it has a lot of questions about philosophy of ministry, a glossary of terms at the end so we can make sure we're on the same page," he said.

The BGCO also provides a 10-section sample set of questions that could be asked in the candidate interview, which includes questions on their salvation testimony, evangelism, pastoral priorities, their personal financial and marital history, views on church government and Scripture as well as convictions on cultural hot topics, like abortion and homosexuality.

Phillips said the rigorous, time-consuming process of discerning and selecting a congregation's spiritual leader is a decision that will have an impact for generations to come.

"While there are many important tasks in church life, there are not many that will have the profound impact on a congregation than calling a new pastor," he said.