

Maintaining Confidentiality in Search Committees

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Many people enjoy “being in the know,” being the first to learn a piece of news as an insider, even if they don’t intend to pass it on to others. But sometimes it’s hard to resist the temptation to tell others about something, even when the news may be harmful or derogatory to someone. Everyone must be reminded of this human tendency when the search process begins, and those who select the committee should look for candidates who are known to demonstrate discretion.

The need for confidentiality should be reiterated to committee members after they are selected for the search committee and throughout the search process. Search committee members must be reminded that the trusted friends with whom they might share information could also be friends or relatives of candidates or their references. In fact, it will be most helpful if the entire congregation is well prepared from the beginning to accept the need for confidentiality and to feel offended at any breach of the principle during the search process.

All information about candidates must remain strictly within the search committee. Spouses, board members, other members of the congregation, even the interim pastor and people outside the congregation may be eager to learn the names of candidates or information about them, such as age, gender, location, experience, and interests. This is all confidential information that should not be shared outside the committee. From the time the congregation begins to receive candidates’ names and information about them, the confidentiality policy should be reasserted and the commitment of all search committee members to observing it secured.

In addition, search committee members must respect and protect the right of each member to express his or her opinions and observations freely. Conversations within the committee about candidates, things going on in the congregation, and other pertinent matters must be kept as confidential as the information about the candidates themselves. Search committee members can be candid with one another only if they are certain that their comments will not be shared outside of the committee. For example, if a committee member expresses reservations about the individual who is finally selected as pastor and this information is made public, the relationship between these two individuals, and even the pastor’s ability to enter the congregation without controversy, could be compromised.

Search committee members must learn to distinguish information and decisions about candidates from general information on the search process. Still, it is probably best to agree that only the committee chair will comment publicly on the search, in writing and orally. The chair should report at Sunday services and in the newsletter what the committee is doing: for example, preparing the congregation profile and defining the characteristics and talents the committee will look for in a new pastor, processing the first list of candidates it receives and developing a list of people to investigate more deeply, conducting phone interviews, seeking background information, preparing for site visits to candidates’ home congregations, and arranging for one or more finalists to be brought for a visit.

Members of the search committee--in fact, all members of the congregation--should be alert to the spreading of information that should be kept confidential. Anyone who hears such information should notify the search committee chair, who should then try to stop the spread of such information by identifying

its source (if possible) and asking the person or persons involved to act more responsibly. If it turns out that a baseless rumor is being spread, measures can be taken to end its circulation. If a search committee member is the source of a leak, the committee should discuss how to proceed (i.e., whether the seriousness of the matter suggests the offender be dropped from committee membership).

In the case of a serious breach of confidentiality, the search committee chair will also have to notify the judicatory executive of what occurred and discuss how to proceed. If the chair fails to do this, the transition companion or any concerned participant in the search should take this step.

A final means of maintaining confidentiality in the search process is for every member to return to the chair or destroy all information they have received about candidates, together with any notes they have made during the search process. Some committees plan to have paper shredders or a bonfire at their closing celebration; others ask members to destroy materials in private. Having the material destroyed will help ensure that the confidentiality that the congregation has worked so hard to maintain will be preserved.

In the end, the highest praise a search committee can receive is the comment: "I never knew any details of the search, and now I'm happy to meet the new pastor without any preconceptions."

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