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1

With Your Back to the Red Sea

Of the two situations that follow, which do you think would be the more difficult prospect for leaders in these two situations? Although you know how one of the two ended, pretend that you don't. Which presents a tougher challenge?

Situation #1: You are Moses leading Israel, and you face a furious Pharaoh and his mighty army. (If you are sketchy on the details of that account, you can read it in Exodus 14.) Pharaoh is unpredictable and has anger management problems. Many of the soldiers are driven by the fury of vengeance for their recently slain firstborn

sons. To top it all off, your only escape route is blocked by a very large body of water—the Red Sea.

Situation #2: You are part of a church looking for a pastor. Perhaps you're an elder or part of the pastoral search committee. Or, maybe you are a member of the church. You need to find God's man for your church. This requires identifying a candidate, getting the pastoral search committee to agree, and garnering your church's overwhelming support of the decision. It probably will also require your candidate to leave a church and community where he has built deep ties with people he loves.

So, which is tougher? What do you think?

The goal in this chapter is to persuade you that the search for a new pastor truly is more difficult. A church looking for a pastor faces a more difficult task than Moses and the Israelites faced—at least in one crucial regard.

Of course, you could argue it the other way. After all, with the Egyptians there was potential for fatal violence. Hopefully you won't face that threat with your pastoral search. Certainly, my point is not to minimize God's character and work as evidenced by the Red Sea miracle. As a general principle in antiquity, a large multitude backed up by a powerful army against a body of water didn't have a great future. It is no small thing that God protected and provided for His people in this way.

The Committed Committee

Yet even as we recognize the difficulty of Moses' situation, if we think about it, we'd probably agree that, humanly speaking, the job of calling the right pastor is impossible. To begin with, leaders in your local church face a major time commitment when they say yes to being on a search committee. Many pastoral search committees meet on a weekly basis. Even those search committees that meet less frequently will find their time constrained as they continue with everyday tasks—getting kids to soccer practice, doing household chores, mowing the lawn, and whatever other obligations they already have. For committee members to be able to surrender the necessary hours amid so many demands in life, their hearts will need supernatural softening and strengthening.

Once you've dealt with the scheduling hurdle, your pastoral search committee and/or elders will need to agree about which resources to consult, from where to recruit, what the search priorities are, and most obviously, which candidate to pursue. Coming to an agreement on these sorts of things isn't always easy—even for a small group. Finally your search brings the committee to a pastoral candidate, which will necessitate that dozens or hundreds or, depending on the size of your church, even thousands agree that this candidate is the right choice—even though we know that getting a church to come to a consensus is like herding cats.

The Committed Candidate

The pastoral search process is also difficult because it requires a major commitment and faith by the pastor

candidate and his family. Most likely, you will be asking your next pastor and his family to leave a place where their hearts are knit together with people. I think about what that would be like for my family right now to go to a different church. We love our church and community. Three of our four children are teenagers, and humanly speaking, it seems impossible to think of moving them at this point in time. If God were to call us away, it would feel like being torn in half.

You might respond, “While it’s true that a church looking for a pastor has a difficult job, it still seems to me that Moses had it worse. The laws of physics being what they are, there seemed to be absolutely no escape for Moses. There was every reason the people should be slaughtered without mercy on the beach and that whoever might survive would be driven right back to Egypt and right back into slavery.”

Do It Yourself

Yet I think the clear impossibility of the Red Sea situation is why it was easier on one level. In the case of the Red Sea, the realists in the crowd—just about everyone—would have quickly recognized that there was nothing they could accomplish to get out of the mess. Their only hope was to throw themselves at the feet of God and pray that He would deliver them. Exodus 14:10 says that the Israelites cried out to the Lord (in addition to blaming Moses [v. 11]).

Contrast this with a pastoral search. Whether or not it is true in your church, the reality is that most pastoral search committees struggle with a presupposition of self-

sufficiency. While they would never admit to themselves or one another that they think they can figure out a pastor on their own, this is the assumption they live out. Many pastoral search committees believe they need no help from beyond their local church. Apart from being willing to heed the input of district leaders or other wise people, most searchers honestly believe they can (and that they must) handle the search completely on their own.

The biggest clue to the self-reliance felt by pastoral search committees is the small amount of attention they devote to prayer. Prayer is the “dental floss” of pastoral searches: something we know we should use but, more often than not, leave at home.

Why is it that churches looking for pastors *know* that they *need* to pray, yet *don't* pray? As I have said, the answer is a false sense of self-sufficiency. Churches think they can do this thing—this *impossible* thing—in their own strength. It was the distinct advantage of the Israelites when they were fleeing from the Egyptians that they *knew* that they were in trouble and that they couldn't possibly get out of the mess they were in on their own. So they cried out to God. And this is where we need to be. Any time we truly realize that we face an impossible situation, it will do wonders for our prayer lives. That is where you need to be as a pastoral search committee.

Behind the Scenes: Prayer

The necessity of prayer during recruitment is seen in the example of our King. These verses from Luke are extremely relevant for a church looking for a pastor:

In these days [Jesus] went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God. And when day came, he called his disciples and chose from them twelve, whom he named apostles: Simon, whom he named Peter, and Andrew his brother, and James and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon who was called the Zealot. (Luke 6:12–15)

Here was Jesus, chairman of the only *perfect* search committee of one. He had *perfect* wisdom and discernment. He was the greatest recruiter in the history of humanity. Yet before He met with candidates for spots on His team, He spent the night in prayer.

Similarly, prayer is necessary for each search committee member as he and she seek to find the right pastor. That's how they did it in the early church, as they sought elders to lead and pastor the sheep:

And after they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. They passed through Pisidia and came into Pamphylia. When they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia. (Acts 14:21–25 NASB; emphasis added)

Notice that the text says that with prayer and fasting they appointed elders for them in each church. Prayer continued throughout the entire process, and the early church rightly associated prayer and fasting with calling pastors.

Prayer is essential at every stage of your pastoral search, from choosing a pastoral search committee to praying for your next pastor. Be sure you do more than just talk about praying. What your local church really needs to do is organize prayer and actually put it into practice. At the end of the pastoral search process, you are going to want assurance that you sought and received God's provision, not your own solutions. That assurance will come in part from knowing that God answered your prayers for those things! It's not a matter of whether you agree that prayer is important. It's a given that prayer *is* essential. Therefore your assurance of a right choice is going to hinge on how that prayer infiltrated the search process. Assurance rises when you can answer positively the following kinds of questions:

- Did the elders put anyone specifically in charge of organizing prayer during your pastoral search?
- When the pastoral search team met, did they spend more time actually praying . . . or making small talk and discussing candidates to pray over?
- Did the elders and those filling the pulpit for the interim teach the congregation about the central importance of prayer through a study of biblical prayers?
- Did the elders encourage your congregation to fast (giving up either food or something else)? Recall

that Jesus said, “Whenever you fast” (Matthew 6:16)—the assumption being that His people would sometimes fast.

- Did you have organized times of congregational prayer when a great number of your people participated? A great idea is to designate a “prayer room” for use before church on Sunday mornings. Your people will already be at church for morning services, and it will not require another night set aside in the week. Did you as a church publish specific prayer requests for the pastoral search?
- Did you encourage your church family to keep prayer journals in which to write out their own prayers for the pastoral search process?
- Did your elders, deacons, and pastoral search committee keep one another accountable for how much and how seriously you prayed for the pastoral search?

Specific Prayer Suggestions

In response to the challenge questions above, you might ask, “How exactly should we pray during our pastoral search?” The following are specific prayer suggestions. They don’t comprise an exhaustive list, but are a good place to begin. I have divided this list into three parts. The first part suggests ways you can pray for your search committee. The second part describes specific ways to pray for your next pastor. And the third part outlines ways to pray for the congregation.

1. Pray for the Search Committee

Here are four areas to pray for on behalf of your search:

- *Pray for patience.* Pray that the group would wait for God's timing.
- *Pray that your search committee will have the mind of Christ and agree.* Much of the process is subjective. Personal opinions and preferences are involved. Differences can divide. Ask that they would heed Paul's advice for unity, having the humble attitude of Jesus Christ (Philippians 2:1–12, especially verse 5). It is so easy for us consciously—or more often, unconsciously—to bring our own agendas into church business.
- *Pray for wisdom to choose the right person.* Pray that the pastoral search committee will renew their minds in the Bible so that they can have Word-centered wisdom (Romans 12:1–2).
- *Pray for discipline for your search committee and other church leaders.* The search process will require a great deal of follow-through on the parts of individuals. It will also require that they not digress from the agenda or retrace decisions they have already made. Pray for unity and agreement between your elders and the pastoral search committee.

2. Pray for Your Next Pastor

Here are five ways you can pray for the future pastor during the search process:

- *Pray that God would increase his passion for preaching the Word of God.*
- *Pray that God would give him a love for your church and the strength to leave his current position (if the candidate senses that is God's direction).*
- *Pray that your next pastor would begin new relationships at your church in the right way, even during the search process.*
- *Pray that God would prepare your future pastor to shepherd your flock more effectively through the trials and blessings he has faced or currently faces.*
- *Pray for your next pastor's family.* Of course, he may be single or married. He may have children or not. God knows all that. Pray that God, who knows each detail about each member of your pastor's household, would give the members of his family strength as they consider leaving their current setting and going to a different church, or beginning pastoral ministry for the first time.

3. Pray for the People in Your Church

Here are three ways you can pray on behalf of your church family during the upcoming search:

- *Pray for patience.* The search process can go on longer than expected. It is hard for people doing the work of searching. It is also difficult for those in the congregation who must wait without knowing exactly what is going on. Pray that your people would trust

the leadership and uphold you during the whole process.

- *Pray that your people would learn to place a high priority on biblical preaching.* It is easy to gravitate toward personality, programs, a particular “ideal” age, etc. Pray that, above all, the congregation would call a pastor who will proclaim the Word without apology.
- *Pray that your people would not react to a previous pastor.* Some churches struggle with wanting a pastor who is like their old one (they had a good experience). Other churches want someone who is just the opposite. (See “Mistake to avoid #9,” page 176.)



THE SUMMARY WORD

Imagine how earnestly you or I would pray if we found ourselves pinned by Pharaoh’s massive army against the Red Sea. It is this same sort of urgency in prayer that we need to bring to the search for a pastor. If your church can remember the impossibility of succeeding on their own, then you will be a people of prayer during your search for a pastor.

One of your first priorities in prayer should be to pray for the formation of your pastoral search committee. The next chapter will introduce you to a group of people who will help you know how to pray about that important step in your search for a pastor.

LUKE OBVIOUSLY ADMIRES [the Bereans'] enthusiasm for Paul's preaching, together with their industry and unprejudiced openness in studying the Scriptures. They combined receptivity with critical questioning.

John Stott

The Spirit, the Word, the Church



NOW THESE JEWS WERE MORE NOBLE than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.

Acts 17:11