

“A Manual for Calling a Pastor” is a valuable resource for pastor search committees. The version below has been edited slightly to reflect current information and resources.

A MANUAL FOR CALLING A PASTOR

The Thirteenth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America adopted a motion which directed the Stated Clerk’s Office to prepare a manual for those congregations that are in search of a pastor. The following is based on the *Book of Church Order*, with some editorial comments and suggestions made by the Stated Clerk as to how a congregation may implement these procedures. It is hoped that this manual will be helpful to the Church at large. The Stated Clerk’s Office would appreciate receiving suggestions as to ways in which the manual can be improved for future use.

PREFACE

The Presbyterian Church in America believes that each congregation has a God-given privilege and right of electing its own officers – including the pastor. This conviction is based on biblical data, such as, Acts 6. When the need for deacons arose the apostles did not appoint them. Instead, the church was asked to choose the officers.

Thus, when a church is without a pastor, the responsibility for finding a man to serve in this office falls on the congregation, not on the General Assembly and not on the presbytery. The PCA’s connectional system of government provides help from other levels when the pulpit is vacant, but the key group in calling a new shepherd is the congregation itself. Because many people are “in the dark” about what to do when this need arises, the following guidelines have been prepared.

It is impractical, of course, for a congregation as a whole to search for a pastor. In recognition of this, the denomination’s *Book of Church Order* provides for a special committee to find a man to recommend. This group is called a “pulpit committee” in the *BCO*, but it is actually a nominating committee since it only nominates a minister to the congregation. Only the congregation, not the committee, can issue a call to a prospective pastor.

I. Election of the Pulpit Nominating Committee

A. Session Calls Congregational Meeting to Elect the Pulpit Nominating Committee (*BCO* 20-2)

“Every church should be under the pastoral oversight of a minister, and when a church has no pastor it should seek to secure one without delay.

“A church shall proceed to elect a pastor in the following manner: The session shall call a congregational meeting to elect a pulpit committee...

“The Session shall order a congregational meeting to convene at the regular place of worship. Public notice of the time, place, and purpose of this meeting shall be given at least one week prior to the time of the meeting.”

B. Composition of the Committee

1. Members at large
2. Session

The *BCO* in 20-2 provides that the pulpit committee “may be composed of member from the congregation at large or the Session, as designated by the congregation (see Chapter 25)”.

From the Book of Acts we learn that the Apostles themselves did not appoint officers, but asked the congregation to elect them (see Acts 6). The Presbyterian Church in America seeks to maintain as an absolute principle the right of the congregations to elect those who shall serve as officers over them. The Session, therefore, should not try to select the pulpit committee prior to the congregational meeting, but rather should call the meeting with the stated purpose given at least one week ahead and allow the congregation full freedom to decide whether they want to name the Session or a select group from their number at large. For the Session to nominate persons for the committee or to suggest that they themselves should serve as the committee could be viewed as an infringement of the rights of the congregation to exercise their freedom in the calling of the minister they desire to have.

II. Organizing the Committee

A. Once the nominating committee is named, it must organize for its work. Ordinarily it will elect its own chairman, though the congregation itself may make this choice at the time of the election of the committee. In addition to a chairman there should be a secretary to keep the minutes of the meetings. The secretary may also be assigned the task of handling committee correspondence (such as writing for ministerial data forms), but some other member(s) of the committee may be given this responsibility.

B. Cautions for the Committee

Several cautions should be noted before the committee begins its search:

- The committee should be open, first of all, to the leading of the Lord. It should not set criteria prematurely or decide on a certain person until it is confident that the decision is based on biblical principles and good for the advancement of Christ’s kingdom. Committee members may receive information from any individuals or groups, but they should not allow outsiders to overwhelm them or dominate their thinking.
- Little of the committee’s work can be reported to the church before a nomination is presented. The reports which are made should be agreed upon by the whole committee.
- Information concerning the ministers under consideration must be handled with extreme care. Often, someone who is consulted about a man “knows something” about him which has not been verified and cannot be verified. If it is not true it should not be repeated and should not be considered.
- In preliminary interviews and communications the committee should avoid making a commitment to a minister regarding a call. Likewise, each individual member should avoid speaking for the committee unless specifically authorized to do so.
- Every effort should be made to avoid embarrassment to prospective pastors, whether during committee visits to their churches and communities, or in communications about them, or in any other way.

III. Work of the Committee

At an early meeting the committee should review its constitutional role in relationship to the church as a whole and to the session (in case it is an “at large” group and not the session itself).

Proper liaison should be maintained with the congregation and the elders since both have their distinctive roles in the calling of a pastor. Prayers should be solicited for the committee's work.

A. Fill Out Church Profile and Desired Pastoral Profile

Before it begins to look at specific names, the nominating group should take a fresh look at the church it is serving and the type of leadership needed at this stage in its life. It is often helpful to ask the session for a comprehensive evaluation of the purpose and goals of the congregation. Up-to-date statistics on membership, attendance, and giving are necessary. A written profile of the church would be helpful to prospective pastors. A form for this may be obtained from the Office of the Stated Clerk.

After putting the picture of the church in focus, the committee should then seek basic agreement on the kind of minister that it is seeking. In other words, a "ministerial profile" is the established by which various candidates can be evaluated. Some committees, for instance, think that it is important to fix age limits. A certain flexibility must be allowed, however, since someone may come along who would qualify in all the other categories on the profile and be just outside the age range established by the committee. There should be freedom to consider such a man whether he be younger or older than the limits.

B. Obtaining names of possible candidates from:

1. Members/friends of the congregation

Several sources of names are available. First of all, the members of the congregation should be encouraged to make suggestions. Friends of the church sometimes step forward with their ideas.

2. *Yearbook*

Another source is the PCA's annual *Yearbook*. It contains a list of all ministers enrolled in the denomination at the end of last year, together with concise biographies of most of them. Included are their age, marital status, number of children, education, and previous experience.

The book also gives details on the church a man is now serving, if he is in the pastorate. Such facts as the congregation's communicant strength, Sunday School enrollment, professions of faith, current expenses, and benevolence divisions are available in the book.

3. Ministerial Data Forms

The Office of the Stated Clerk of the PCA General Assembly can also provide names. The office has been charged with the responsibility of maintaining a file of ministerial data forms. Ministers of the denomination are not required to fill out such forms for the clerk's office, and thus forms are not immediately available on every preacher in the denomination. Some forms are also available for non-PCA ministers. Many PCA men interested in a move are represented by current data forms. The Stated Clerk's files may be useful to a congregation's nominating committee either at the stage of getting together a list of names or at the stage of getting details on the men being considered seriously. The committee may ask simply that the office forward a number of names to be considered. When this request is received the Clerk will go through the files and select the names of about a dozen to send. His sending them to a particular church does **not** mean that

he recommends them. It is simply an information service provided by the office to help a church that needs some names with which to begin its search. If none of the names seems suitable, the committee should feel free to ask for more. The office will be happy to comply with the request as often as is necessary.

Ministerial data forms on specific men may be requested from the clerk's office by a committee which has plenty of names but which wants more information on certain of the prospects. If the form is on file in the office, a copy will be sent immediately to the committee. If none is on file, the clerk's office will act as the intermediary and request the current information from the minister. When he returns it, a copy is made and sent to the requesting group. Some men prefer not to complete the forms. When this happens the committee may decide to contact the man directly.

4. Seminaries

Another source of names (and often of some evaluative help) is the placement offices of seminaries. These institutions are interested not only in helping current seniors find first pastorates, but they also work with their alumni in relocation. Seminaries are usually happy to supply information to churches. Regardless of how a committee first got a name, a check with the man's seminary can be very helpful. Professors are often able to give a good assessment of a man's capabilities.

C. Evaluation of candidates

When a list of names has been gathered, the committee must then move on to evaluation and decision. The committee may use any or all of the following resources for evaluation of their candidates:

1. Gather data

- a. Resumes/data forms
- b. Sermon recordings from candidate or church websites
- c. References
- d. Person(s) recommending candidate

Much of the evaluation can be done on the basis of information gathered from the person suggesting the name, the data from the minister himself, his own blog, sermons on his church's website, and data from his references and from others.

2. Remote interviews

Having narrowed the list to a limited number, the committee may want to enter into personal contacts for its further evaluation of the candidates. One way of doing this is by remote interviews of the several candidates.

Members may sit around a table at which a speaker phone has been installed, or use several other remote options available through phone and internet so that all can participate in the discussion. These interviews should be concerned with a man's views on preaching and teaching, but they should cover many other subjects also. His work as a presbyter, his evangelistic methods, his approach to pastoral responsibilities, and his involvement in the community matters are among the topics that ought to be handled in the initial discussions. The committee may want to inquire about his approach to how he would handle particular types of problems.

3. Visit the church of the candidate

In order to settle on the top candidate, the committee must gain more than a superficial knowledge about the nominee. Usually, this calls for a visit to his current work and extended face-to-face discussion with him. It is important to know how he conducts a service and to hear him preach.

Depending on distances, the whole committee may want to visit the churches where the top prospects are ministering. Generally, the initial visits are made anonymously. It is usually a good idea to call ahead to be sure of the time of the service and to make certain that the man under consideration will be preaching that particular Sunday. In smaller churches it may be better for only one or two members of a committee to visit any particular service since a group would be easily spotted by the minister or by the congregation.

Committee members on a visit can do their work more effectively and avoid embarrassment to the prospect if they keep in mind the following suggestions:

- Be on time for the service.
- Enter the sanctuary either in pairs or singly rather than a large noticeable group of strangers. The committee may want to leave the church grounds in the same way, so as not to alert congregation of their presence.
- Avoid being conspicuous, which disturbs both the minister and the congregation.
- Note the makeup of the congregation, including the number of men and young people.
- Having a receptive and inquiring attitude. Ask:
 - (1) Does the service begin on time?
 - (2) Does the service run smoothly?
 - (3) Does the minister read Scripture carefully and well?
 - (4) What is his pulpit manner?
 - (5) Are his prayers helpful?
 - (6) Is the sermon well organized, easily followed, and applicable to life?
 - (7) Is the congregation attentive?
 - (8) What is the minister's custom at close of the service?
- Greet the minister simply and cordially upon departure from the service.
- If the visiting group is authorized and desires to do so, an appointment for an interview may be sought. If possible, include his wife and family.

4. Discreet inquiries in community

Make discreet inquiries of various people in the community about the man and his ministry.

During the interview with the minister, explore the whole situation thoroughly. Maintain a cordial spirit throughout the conversations. Present the challenge of your church wholeheartedly and give frank responses to all questions the minister may raise. If there are problem areas in the Church, it is better to "lay the cards on the table", so that there are no surprises after the minister is called. The committee may want to determine a number of matters about the man's wife, such as, her attitude toward his calling and work, whether she is employed outside the home, and whether her membership is in the denomination, and her participation in the congregational life.

D. Personal visit by candidate

When the committee has settled on its top candidate it may want to provide an opportunity for the whole congregation to get acquainted with him. Generally speaking, it is advisable for the committee to present only one name at a time to the congregation. In the past, several candidates were presented to a church, and the congregation was asked to decide between them. It is not necessarily wrong to do so, but there is a distinct danger that this practice will divide the church into parties. It is a better procedure for the committee to make up its mind on a first choice to present. This puts more of a responsibility on the committee and means that it must make hard choices, but the members have been selected to do just such a task.

If the committee wants to proceed further with a particular man, the next step should be to invite him (and his wife) to visit the congregation and community. The committee should see that travel expenses are borne by the church, and that every thoughtful courtesy is extended to the visitors. The committee or its representatives should meet the man upon his arrival and seek to create a good first impression for the church he is visiting.

1. There are two approaches to the visit of the candidate. One is to have the minister come for a worship service and to preach for the congregation.
2. The second approach is to have him come to see the community, the facilities, etc., and to meet with the church leaders and perhaps informally with the congregation, but not to preach. Some candidates will have definite preferences. The choice will be finally up to the committee and the session. One sermon, especially prepared for such an occasion, may not tell much about a man. But unless the visit is well arranged so that members may get to know the man in some better way, the sermon may have value.

In addition to preaching and/or visiting the congregation, the candidate could be introduced to representatives of various different groups of the church, such as, the session, diaconate, officers of the WIC, youth leaders, Sunday School teachers, etc. This gives an opportunity for getting acquainted on the part of both the candidate and the congregation at large.

E. Request for Congregational Meeting

When a committee is satisfied that it should make a nomination, it should notify the session. It is the session's responsibility to call a congregational meeting, but not their right to veto the committee's nomination. If good communication has been maintained, there should be no difficulty here.

F. Conclusion of Business with the Candidates

Once the committee has decided on the man, it should notify him (no later than one month after his visit) that it is recommending him or is not recommending him. Likewise, within a month after receiving a call, a minister should give an answer to the congregation.

IV. Election and Call of Nominee

A. Session calls a congregational meeting (*BCO* 20-3ff) to vote

When the committee is ready to nominate a candidate, it requests the Session to call a congregational meeting for the purpose of hearing a report from the pulpit nominating committee, and taking appropriate actions in relation to it.

Under *BCO* 20-3 a PCA minister should be asked to moderate, if possible. The sections which follow describe how the nomination should be presented and how the election is to be conducted. “The Session shall appoint one of their number to call the meeting to order and to preside until the congregation shall elect their presiding officer.” All communing members in “good and regular standing” may vote in the churches in which they are members.

After prayer for guidance, the Moderator shall ask the question: “Are you ready to proceed to the election of a pastor?” At this point the *BCO* allows for other nominations, if any. The General Assembly has determined that the voting must be done by ballot and that a majority of all voters present must be required to elect. When the congregation decides to issue a call, it must appoint: 1. those who will sign it, and 2. those who prosecute the call before the presbytery.

B. Notification of Candidate with Vote

The minister being called should be notified immediately by the committee chairman or someone he designates.

This notification should include the vote so that if it was divided, he may take this into consideration.

BCO 20-6 specifies the form of the call, which should include such items as salary, and other benefits, such as manse, retirement, insurance, vacations, moving expenses, etc.

The following is the text prescribed by the *BCO* for a call:

The Church of _____, being on sufficient grounds well satisfied of the ministerial qualifications for you, _____, and having good hopes from our knowledge of your labors that your ministrations in the Gospel will be profitable to our special interests, do earnestly call you to undertake the pastoral office in said congregation, promising you, in the discharge of your duty, all proper support, encouragement and obedience in the Lord.

That you may be free from worldly cares and avocations, we hereby promise and oblige ourselves to pay you the sum of \$_____ a year in regular monthly payments, and other benefits, such as manse _____, annuity _____, medical insurance _____, vacation _____, moving expenses _____, other _____, during the time of your being and continuing the regular pastor of this church.

In testimony whereof we have respectively subscribed our name this _____ day of _____ A.D. _____.

Attest: I having moderated the congregational meeting which extended to a call to _____ for his ministerial services, do certify that the call has been made in all respects according to the rules laid down in the *Book of Church Order*, and that the persons who signed the forgoing call were authorized to do so by the vote of the congregation.

(Moderator of the Meeting)

Information about the PCA retirement and insurance programs may be obtained from the Retirement and Benefits, Inc. office, 1700 North Brown Road, Suite 106, Lawrenceville, GA 30043, 678-825-1260. To assist the committee in determining the minister's benefits package, RBI provides the Call Package Guidelines packet, which is available online at the RBI website, www.pcarbi.org.

C. Notification of Presbytery for Examination of Candidate

Once the candidate indicates his intention to accept, the session should notify the clerk of the presbytery so that his examination and reception can be docketed. A called meeting of presbytery may be requested to approve the call, but this is not the best procedure. Some presbyteries, in fact, provide in their standing rules that ministers may be received only in regular stated meetings.

Candidates for the ministry or licentiates are allowed to move onto the field prior to ordination, but ordained ministers are not to move until approved by presbytery. This is to avoid embarrassment for a man should he fail to pass presbytery's examination.

D. Commission Named for Installation

Once the new man is approved and presbytery has placed the call in his hands, a time and place are set for his installation. A presbytery commission is named, usually upon the recommendation of the man and the local church. No one should be named to the commission until his availability is determined.

V. Installation (with Ordination, if Candidate is a Licentiate)

Finally, the happy day arrives, and after the new pastor gives satisfactory answers to the constitutional questions, he is installed, and the pulpit nominating committee is dismissed.

For additional help in how to evaluate a candidate, see Donald J. MacNair's *Birth, Care and Feeding of a Church*, obtainable from the Committee for Christian Education and Publications.