

What kind of a pastor does your church really want?

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About six months ago I started a new call as the senior pastor of a church in New Hampshire. I truly loved the congregation I previously served, but with a wife who had just graduated from seminary herself, and a feeling that God was nudging me to something new, I began the long discernment that comes with a pastoral search process.

Unlike my first search process, where I sent my profile (the UCC version of a pastor's resume) to just about every church that was searching, I was more selective this time. I wasn't willing to move for anything less than the right call, which is a great luxury for a searching pastor. But it also meant that I ended up saying "no" a lot. I love a challenge, but I did not feel called to a place where my understanding of ministry, and the church's, were so radically different that we were in fundamentally different places.

The biggest thing I learned is that everyone says they want a pastor, but not everyone means the same thing when they say that. Here are just some of the understandings of what it meant to be a pastor that I encountered in my search:

Chaplain—No disrespect meant to chaplains (I was one for eight years) but the role of a parish pastor and that of a chaplain are very different. And yet, over and over I met parishes who wanted someone to spend most of their time "doing home and hospital visits."

I'm always glad to visit, but the first question I had for churches who wanted this was "Who does this now?" Most of the time the answer was "no one . . . that's the pastor's job." This was always a huge red flag for me because the work of visitation is supposed to be done by all Christians, not just the pastor. In fact, having a strong and vibrant network of lay visitors is a great sign of church vitality. You don't have to go to seminary to make a visit, after all; you just need to love the people of your church.

Fundraiser—In my interviews when the time came for me to ask questions I asked “What’s the biggest crisis facing this church right now?” More times than not I was told “money.” Churches said they didn’t have enough of it, or people weren’t pledging like they used to, or expenses were too high. Then they often asked me, “How can you help us fix that?”

The reality is that I like talking about stewardship in the church. I think it’s a key part of the Christian life. But, the pastor can’t be your church’s fundraiser. The pastor can help to set the tone for the conversation, but they cannot control the bottom line. The money has to come from the congregation itself, and the stewardship campaign itself needs to be run by faithful and creative lay leaders. A new pastor will not be the magic bullet that balances your church’s budget.

Complaint box—This works two ways. First, people complain to the pastor about everything that they think is wrong with the church, and expect them to immediately fix it. Later, when the pastor doesn’t fix everything, people complain to the pastor about everything that is wrong with the pastor.

Some of the churches I talked to spent their interview complaining about everything from the fact not as many people came to church anymore to the fact their last pastor was “terrible” (a red flag for interviewing pastors if ever there was one). Those were the churches that I knew were ready to blame everyone else for what wasn’t going right. And every pastor knows that it only takes so long until they will become the sacrificial lamb in a church like that.

Entertainer—I will be the first to say that pastors need to do their best to not preach boring, lifeless, irrelevant sermons. And yet, so many churches I talked to wanted someone who would be “funny,” or “tell us stories” in the pulpit. A few even noted that they loved when their pastor sang solos on Sunday mornings. They wanted a pastor who would entertain them!

But that’s not the role of a pastor in the pulpit. The pastor’s job in preaching is to present the text in a way that is faithful to scripture and relatable to the congregation. Hopefully they won’t do that in a way that puts everyone to sleep, but at the end of the day the church would do better with more faithful preachers than more “entertaining” ones.

Recruiter—“What will you do to increase our membership?” It’s the question candidates get all the time from churches. The expectation is that a new pastor

needs to come in and build up Sunday attendance and church membership. In this way the pastor becomes the church recruiter, and is even seen as a sort of potential savior. (That should be a red flag, if it's not.)

But while a new pastor might draw a few more visitors, they can't be the person responsible for building church membership up. Even if they go door to door to invite new people to church, if those people come to church and don't feel welcomed by the congregation they will not stay. Instead, every church member needs to be responsible for inviting others, welcoming them on Sunday, and then helping to make them part of the congregation.

Kept sheep—My go-to softball question for search committees was a no-brainer: Do you want a pastor who is involved in your community? Usually search committees jumped on this and said, "Yes, of course!" But in one interview I asked the committee this question and, instead of hearing "yes," I instead heard "Well . . . maybe." The committee then went on to say that they thought their pastor would have enough to do just serving them. They didn't want their pastor to get involved in local organizations, to hold drop-in hours out in the community, or to do much in the wider church.

This interview reminded me of a question I heard someone ask a church years ago: "Do you want a shepherd? Or a kept sheep?" Of course almost every church will say the former, but, the egregious example above aside, how many mean it? Do you really want a pastor who will serve your community and the wider church? Or do you just want a pastor who will serve the people who are already in your church? Healthy congregations don't just "allow" their clergy to engage the world beyond the church's four walls; they encourage it.

Pastor and teacher—This is the one I was looking for, and the one I found. The Letter to the Ephesians talks about how Christ has given each of us different gifts and graces. The author writes, "The gifts Christ gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, *some pastors and teachers*, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ."

For most of us in the United Church of Christ our call agreements state that we are becoming "pastor and teacher" of a local church. At the end of the day, that's what I believe a clergy person is called to be. We are called to faithfully shepherd a congregation in its life together, and to teach that congregation about Christ's love

for all.

What that entails can look different for each congregation, but at the end of the day your pastor should be doing the ministry that they have been prepared for through calling and training. And they can't do that ministry well if they are also taking on the responsibilities that belong to, and can and should be carried out by, all members of your congregation.

So, what kind of pastor does your church really want? If you are a congregation in search, or even just a congregation trying to figure out where it wants to go, take the time to ask yourself this question. And then, if necessary, adjust expectations. If you do, you will free your pastor to do the ministry God has equipped them to do best. And, more importantly, you will see the people of your church stepping up to do the ministry God has equipped them to do as well.

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