

Do you actually want to be our pastor?

## **A story about a search committee and a candidate**

by [Winn Collier](#) in the [September 27, 2017](#) issue



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Hank Pierce and Amy Quitman were neighbors on Rural Route 28. Their mailboxes shared a weathered post at the end of the gravel lane. This seemed fitting, since their families also shared a weathered pew at Granby Presbyterian Church. Hank and Amy—along with Tom, the tire salesman, and Luther, the county’s public defender—made up Granby’s Pastoral Search Committee. Though a thankless job, their assignment did mean that every Thursday night they’d sit in the church’s empty manse, drink Folgers, and enjoy a few minutes shooting the bull. Then they’d return to the pile of résumés that represented the fleeting hope for their

beleaguered flock.

This night, though, after the coffee and the gossip, they sat quietly, staring at the stack. Over these last several months, they'd endured phone interviews with four candidates and visits from two more. After confirming the town's modest population or seeing the church's humble clapboard building, three candidates quickly exited the process. One candidate turned out to be an ex-con and abruptly stopped answering their calls. Last they heard, he was back preaching in the pen.

Another of the candidates had only been in the room with them ten minutes before commencing his pitch on how necessary it would be to change the church's name. Two leadership books and a weekend conference had convinced him that "Revolution Tribe" would attract folks by the truckload. The final candidate, after an hour of meet-and-greet, pulled out his MacBook to cue up a presentation on the exponential growth curve of satellite campuses. Somehow this aspiring clergyperson missed the miles of farms and the Blue Ridge tree line as he drove into town.

The process had become a circus show. Now Amy and Hank and Luther and Tom were exhausted. The silence stretched on, and no one had the energy to break it.

"I'm bone-tired of interviews," Amy finally said, as she set her frost-blue mug on the table and reached into her purse. Unfolding a sheet of cream stationery, she continued. "I'd like to just send a letter to our candidates—and make them actually write back. With a pen. And real paper."

Luther leaned forward. "What kind of letter?"

"This kind of letter." And Amy began to read.

Dear Potential Pastor,

Thank you for your interest in Granby Presbyterian Church. We're a pretty vanilla congregation, though we do have enough ornery characters to keep a pastor hopping. If you've got a sense of humor, you're not likely to get bored. We pay as much as we can, though it's never enough. Your job is hard, and we know it. I think you'd find us grateful for your prayers and your sermons—and even more grateful for eating apple fritters with us at the Donut Palace.

We do have a few questions for you. Perhaps we're foolish, but I'm going to assume you love Jesus and aren't too much of a loon when it comes to your creed. We want theology, but we want the kind that will pierce our soul or prompt tears or leave us sitting in a calm silence, the kind that will put us smack-dab in the middle of the story, the kind that will work well with a bit of Billy Collins or Wendell Berry now and then. Oh, and we like a good guffaw. I'll be upfront with you: we don't trust a pastor who never laughs. We'll put up with a lot—but that one's a deal-killer.

Here are our questions. We'd like to know if you're going to use us. Will our church be your opportunity to right all the Church's wrongs, the ones you've been jotting down over your vast ten years of experience? (Sorry, I'm one of the ornery ones.) Is our church going to be your opportunity to finally enact that one flaming vision you've had in your crosshairs ever since seminary, that one strategic model that will finally get this Church-thing straight? Or might we hope that our church could be a place where you'd settle in with us and love alongside us, cry with us and curse the darkness with us, and remind us how much God's crazy about us?

In other words, the question we want answered is very simple: Do you actually want to be our pastor?

I'm trying to be as straight as I know how: Will you love us? And will you teach us to love one another? Will you give us God—and all the mystery and possibility that entails? Will you preach with hope and wonder in your heart?

Will you tell us, again and again, about "the love that will not let us go," not ever? Will you believe with us—and for us—that the kingdom is truer than we know—and that there are no shortcuts? Will you tell us the truth—that the huckster promise of a quick fix or some glitzy church dream is 100 percent BS?

Amy placed the letter on the table. The other three stared at the page, silent. Then, one by one, they took the pen and signed their names.

Jonas McAnn's nightstand held a pile of correspondence from church committees, questionnaires and profiles bulging from a manila folder. On top of the folder sat his disheveled pile of current reads: Mark Spragg's *Where Rivers Change Direction*, John

Irving's *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, a biography of Harriet Tubman, a leather-bound edition of Karl Barth's prayers, and a slim collection of poetry titled *Freebird*, published by inmates from the county jail. Jonas picked up one, usually two, of the books nightly, but he hadn't cracked the folder in weeks.

Every few months, Jonas would find himself so wearied by his days trapped in the cubicle at the insurance company, he'd go on another bender and fire off résumés to churches far and wide. Soon after each outburst Jonas would return to his senses and wonder what insanity had overtaken him. With the résumés, Jonas felt like a faceless name writing to faceless names, pimping his pastoral credentials.

The last time he attempted a reply, he got as far as question no. 3 on the Pastoral Candidate Information Form: *What vision do you have for our church? Please list the first five strategic steps you would take in order to implement this vision.* Jonas didn't know this church. He wasn't even sure he'd ever heard of the city. So he didn't have the foggiest clue what these fine souls looked like this morning, much less what they should look like three years from now. And anyway, who was he to possess the word on high about the future of people he didn't even know? Jonas figured he'd learned enough to bluff his way through all the hoops, and some of his pastoral compadres suggested that putting his head down and working the system was exactly what the process required. But he just couldn't do it.

The entire mess made Jonas want to either take a nap or throw a chair through the wall. But what's a pastor to do when he's got no people to pastor?

Then a letter arrived from a woman named Amy on behalf of Granby Presbyterian. Handwritten. A single page. They didn't drill him with knucklehead questions. They only asked if he was actually interested in being a pastor. The next morning, Jonas rose an hour early to work out his reply.

Dear Amy, Luther, Tom, and Hank,

I can't tell you how good it is to write a letter to actual people with actual names. "To Whom It May Concern" has worn me thin.

I think we're good on the creed. I can't honestly say I always believe all the words, but I pray them anyway. I ask God to help me believe them more. In my experience, anyone who says "we believe" too glibly either

hasn't suffered much or simply isn't paying attention. Then again, praying the creed with a little fear and trembling, a gut hope that it's all true, yields a sturdiness deserving of the word *faith*. At any rate, the creed is necessarily something we say together, something we can only truly believe *together*. So if this candidate process leads anywhere, we'd have to hold one another up. We'd have to keep asking each other whether or not we believe. I assume I'd hold you up on your weak days, and you'd hold me up on mine.

I notice you didn't ask about my family. In a way, that's nice. A previous church thought my wife and I came as a package deal. They were in for a shocker. Alli doesn't play piano. Truthfully, she'd need a bucket to carry a tune. She doesn't do children's ministry, either. And she's never been to a women's ministry craft night or a Christian women's conference. If your heart's broken or you need someone to drop an expletive and pray with you against the evil, Alli's your gal. But she's her own woman, and we like it that way. My wife's a firecracker. She's my truest friend, and the person I respect most in the world. Sometimes I gush about her in sermons, so you'd have to get used to that. She's probably the best Christian I know, but every so often, she'll tell me, "Jonas, I love God, and I love you—but right now I'm barely tolerating Sundays." That admission used to make me nervous. I mean, if the pastor's wife quit the church, it would make for awkward conversations. I don't get nervous anymore, though. Alli listens to God, so what good would my scrambling panic do?

We have two sons and a daughter (Ash, Eli, and Mercy). They have their own faith, but they've got all the issues every kid has. It's tough work being a kid these days. If you expect more from my three than you expect from your own—or if you expect the same but you're all overachievers who set the bar sky high—we should probably end this right here.

I have to tell you—reading your letter, you sound fatigued to me. And I find that comforting. I know I'm exhausted. I'm exhausted because of the hours I'm pulling at a job that sucks the life right out of me. I'm exhausted for the same reasons we all are—trying to put food on the table and pay the mortgage and run in four directions at once. But mainly I'm sucking wind because it seems as though I'm wired for a world that doesn't exist

anymore.

Initially, I went to seminary because ministry was the family trade, my dad having been a pastor for 46 years. But I stayed in seminary because of a funeral and a painting.

The funeral was for my best friend's 21-month-old daughter. They put her to bed one night, and she never woke up again. I witnessed as the agony broke my friend, shattered his marriage. And all my doubts, all the angst lurking at the fringes for so many years, rushed forward and sunk their talons into my soul. It was my friend's grief, but it became my crisis.

Seven months later, I attended a gallery showing for another friend. Juli had brushed one of her canvases with simple colors, swashes of blues and greens. This painting hung in a side section of the exhibit, and when I turned the corner and caught my first glimpse, my eyes went moist. I still don't know what that moment was about, but I decided then and there that Dostoevsky was right: beauty will save the world. Beauty, which I understand to be another word for *love*, offered the only hope I could imagine for the horror my friends had experienced. It was the only hope for the endless anxieties and labyrinthine questions I carried. I needed love in person, love powerful and alive. I needed beauty to overwhelm all the ugly. As I understood the Bible's story, I needed Jesus.

So I committed my life to walking alongside people who I hoped to call friends. I committed to learning how to help people pray. I determined it would be my job to simply recount, over and again, that one beautiful story of how Love refused to tally the costs but came for us, came to be with us, came to heal us. I took ordination vows and promised that though I might be asked to do many things as pastor, I would always do this one thing: I would point to God. And I would say one simple word: "Love."

But it didn't take me long to figure out that lots of churches don't actually want a pastor. They want a leadership coach or a fundraising executive or a consultant to mastermind a strategic takeover (often performed under the moniker of *evangelism* or *missional engagement*). In this scheme, there's little room for praying and gospel storytelling, for conversations requiring the slow space needed if we're to listen to love. All the things I

thought I had been called to do were now ancillary. They barely registered on my job description.

So, after nearly 14 years, I packed it in. I just couldn't make sense of things anymore. Still, 18 months ago, I started looking for a church to serve again. I couldn't escape the vows. I had made promises, and so far as I've heard, God hasn't let me loose yet. There's still a fire in my belly. But I have to warn you: I've got zilch energy for playing churchy games. I've got a decent knowledge of who I am and who I'm not. I have a fair idea of what I've got to say and who I've got to be. I'll laugh and dance and hope and pray and fight and believe—and I'll ask forgiveness whenever I screw up. But I won't strap on the clerical collar just to play a role. I won't prance about on eggshells trying to keep everyone content with how the machine grinds on time. The truth is, my give-a-shit's broke. I'm not saying this is entirely healthy. God knows, I need salvation as much as the next person. But if you get me, this is what you get.

Too much pastoral leadership literature recirculates anxious efforts to make the church significant or influential or up-to-date. I think my job is to remind the church that she already *is* something. Can we settle down and be who we are, *where* we are? Can we take joy in the beauty already present in us and around us, right here, as things are? In contradiction to the brassy or the instantaneous, I take my pastoral motto from Mary Oliver, who insists that our spiritual practice doesn't require the lushness of "the blue iris"; all we need is "weeds in a vacant lot, or a few small stones." All we need is to keep watching, keep doing the best we can with whatever we have.

This letter is too long, just like my sermons. I'm working on it. But all this is to say that if our conversation leads anywhere and I were to join your motley band, *being your pastor* is the only thing I'd know how to do. I'm at an utter loss on anything else.

Oh—and one more thing. Aside from the normal financial and vacation considerations (and this would be a good place to say that six weeks of vacation is a bare minimum), I've just now decided that I would insist on one further contractual obligation. If I were your pastor, I'd want to continue this letter-writing thing. We're on to something.

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