The search process in the United Church of Christ is an astonishing blend of employment work and spiritual work. Seeking to hire a well-qualified pastor, you will identify qualities and skills you desire in your new employee, and you will conduct yourselves professionally as you advertise, recruit, read applications, and interview candidates. While you follow these steps, you also are on a spiritual journey. What you do is much more than recruitment and hiring work, for you affirm that God is an active force in this search process. You seek to choose the candidate you believe God desires for your congregation. It is that dimension of God’s active participation in the process which makes your task quite different from any other kind of personnel activity.

The candidates you will interview go through exactly the same delicate process. They are “job searching,” looking for situations which will offer adequate compensation, healthy work environments, professional growth, and communities which are comfortable for their families; at the same time, they too seek to discern God’s will for their next ministry.

In the church, we use the word “call” to reflect that distinct blend of practical and spiritual issues. The local congregation does not “hire” a new pastor but “calls” a pastor; that call process comes in response to a careful and business-like search combined with a strong sense of God’s leading. The pastor does not seek a new “job” but rather enters into an employment process whose end result will be rooted in God’s call to a new ministry.

Your packet of search committee materials prepares you well to do the personnel portions of your work. By utilizing scripture passages and reflection questions, this resource enables you to develop a pattern of intentionally speaking “faith language” as you go about your work. You will have structured opportunities to talk frankly about your understanding of God’s will for your church. At every step of the process, you will be encouraged to “ask the God question.”

The work of a search committee is demanding and time-consuming. You may be tempted to avoid the faith conversations suggested by these devotions. But learning together to listen to God is indeed the “real” work of your committee.

The Role Of The Chaplain

The Conference suggests that your committee select a chairperson, a secretary/scribe, and a chaplain. The chaplain should be someone who enjoys scripture, is sensitive to group dynamics, and is willing to invest the time necessary to study the various devotional pieces and share them with the committee. The chaplain’s edition includes additional background information on each lesson for the Chaplain’s preparation. Two of the sessions are designed to last approximately one hour; the first is a “get acquainted/community building” time; the second occurs during an interlude while the committee is advertising its position and waiting for applications. The other reflections may be used as 10-15 minute opening devotions whenever your committee moves to a new stage of the search process.
Each pastoral search committee offers a mini-picture of the total congregation. Among you are some life long members as well as newer members; you also represent various ages and arenas of church involvement. You may come from a variety of religious backgrounds, and some of you may have had no formal religious involvement until recently. A few of you may have had previous experience serving on a pastoral search committee while others feel bewildered about the upcoming process. Some of you will approach this search committee work analytically while others will use intuition and feelings to aid in the discernment process. Whether you are a choir member or a trustee, a recent confirm or a part of the retired men’s group, a person with experience in personnel matters or a newcomer to this work, you are a member of this committee because you care deeply about the ministry of this particular church and the quality of pastoral leadership needed to carry out that ministry.

Because you will be working together for a period of 9-18 months, you will find it beneficial to become acquainted with one another at a deeper faith level than may customarily happen in church meetings. A four-step process is suggested.

First, take 3-4 minutes for each person to share both his/her religious background and current involvement with this particular congregation. Rather than simply listing committees on which you have served, talk about what energizes you, what discourages you, what hopes and dreams you have. You may want to tell something amusing about your first memory of this congregation. Try to include one piece of information that others in the room may not know.

Second, go around the group again and invite the members to relate an experience when they felt the closeness of God’s presence; (such experiences might include the Christmas Eve service, a period of illness or loss of a family member, the birth of a child, etc.)

Third, the chaplain or person leading this meditation time should briefly summarize what you have learned about yourselves as a group after listening to these personal histories.

Fourth, read together Matthew 20:1-16. This story is one of the most challenging and difficult of all the parables Jesus shared. A first reaction is usually expressed with the simple words, “But it’s not fair!” In your search committee discussion, focus less on the economics of the parable than on the image of God’s relationship to us; remember that Jesus frames the story to emphasize the giver rather than the gift.

How do you feel about the “picture” of God presented in this parable? Are you angered by God’s generosity?

How can this story help us develop common understandings about respecting one another and listening to one another?

PRAYER: God of surprises, we are astonished by your overflowing love. We offer you our thanks that—through many different routes—we each have come to an experience of faith in you. We rejoice in the fact that we are equally valued by you, whether we have been life long followers of your Son Jesus or whether we have come to our faith very recently. May we rely on your guidance as we begin to work together in this committee. In Christ’s name, Amen.
This particular meditation is designed to be the primary agenda item for a session early in the search committee’s work. In order to build a close-knit community, it is vitally important that people know one another well; it is particularly necessary for them to know one another’s faith stories. Even committee members who have been acquainted for decades will find that they can learn something new about others when they talk about their religious histories.

It will be helpful to have Bibles available or to make copies of the parable. Sharing stories with one another, reading the parable, and reflecting on the questions will take a minimum of 45-60 minutes. As chaplain, it will be important for you to “move the conversation along” if one member begins to talk for an unusually long period of time.

The parable of the workers in the vineyard has been selected with considerable care. It is a very difficult story. But its challenging message can serve to point the committee in a direction which will be helpful now and in the coming months. All too often church members have a tendency to defer to those who are most vocal or those who have the longest history of involvement in a particular congregation. If the committee members can agree to listen carefully to one another, to respect one another, and to honor one another’s opinions equally, then they may avoid tension and conflict in the future.

In your discussion of this parable, it may be helpful to remember that the owner of the vineyard is choosing a different standard by which to pay his employees. He is not basing his payment on logical economic reimbursement but rather on his own sense of compassion. The owner chooses to be generous to all, even though the owner’s action is contrary to everything we would expect. That same sense of God’s amazing compassion is evident in the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32). The hardworking, loyal son who remained home repairing fences and tending the property, day after day, complains because his father has never honored him with a festival. The father responds by speaking of the love which he desires to pour out on one who had been lost and then found, even if that son had done no work and had squandered his entire inheritance.

As we look with amazement at God’s generosity, we are reminded again that no one can earn God’s love. Some among your committee members may feel that long service entitles them to a particular position of power on the committee. Appreciation for such faithful service must be expressed again and again in the context of discussing this particular parable. It is essential that no one go home from the discussion feeling devalued or unaffirmed. It will be an ongoing challenge for your entire committee to find the balance between acknowledging the rich traditions of the congregation while recognizing that the church’s future may be focused on God’s words spoken to the prophet Isaiah.

“Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing:
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”

(Isaiah 43:18-19a)

This parable is one you may want to return to again and again. It may be particularly valuable later in the search process when committee members are experiencing pressure from certain vocal members of the congregation. (i.e. “What do we do about Mildred Jones? She has been a member for 45 years, and she is telling everyone she will cancel her pledge if we recommend a woman candidate?”) Such comments are bound to come to the committee; at that point a gentle reminder about this parable can be very helpful.
Understanding our Church Family

“Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”
(Mark 3:35, NRSV)

During these first weeks together, your committee will be asked to spend a great deal of time gathering data and exploring perspectives on your congregation. The process may feel time-consuming and frustrating. But the work you do at this stage is essential because it will enable you to understand the unique characteristics of your congregation and to interpret them effectively to prospective candidates.

Read Mark 3:31-35

Jesus’ words remind us that all family ties are subordinate to attentiveness to God’s will.
In your work as a search committee, you might use these words to help identify who it is who makes up your community of faith. In many small towns, the UCC congregation is the only mainline Protestant church in the community. As such, the church pastor is expected to provide a ministry to the entire community. Such a reality raises questions which the search committee members need to explore. It will be important for your group to have some clear definition of your own understanding of how the pastor will relate to the wider community. The pastor who is expected to conduct many funerals each month for non-members will find it difficult to be fully attentive to Sunday worship and pastoral care. Likewise, in a large church, the pastor who is expected to be an active member of numerous hospital boards and other non-profit groups will not be able to provide the necessary administrative oversight of the staff. Whatever the size of the church, outreach to the community and mission/service within the community are essential to the church’s ministry. It will be your task to talk honestly about how that outreach is balanced between the pastor and the people.

What do you believe Jesus meant when he made this statement?

In a small town, people who have no formal tie to the church still view the congregation as “their” church. Search committee members often believe they have an obligation to receive feedback and input from such persons. How do Jesus’ comments speak to that situation?

Do these words of Jesus give you any help in describing the unique qualities of your particular church?

Prayer: It is far too easy, O God, to forget that first joined the church because we wanted to learn more about you and to do your will. As members of this committee, we ask for your guidance as we seek to know your will; help us to know where you would lead us, to know what work you call us to do. Broaden us, challenge us, for we remember that the work we do describing our church is designed to reflect your glory. In Christ’s name, Amen.
Your background reading material for this particular devotional offers a way of describing/categorizing your congregation which may be helpful to the search committee in its work of preparing the local church profile. (You may want to copy this page for the entire committee.) Pastors and laity who study local churches have begun to move away from describing them by the number of members, the size of the facility, or the size of the budget. Rather, descriptions now tend to focus on the way churches function depending on the approximate size of the Sunday morning congregation. The qualities needed in a pastor are directly related to the way your church functions. As you read the following material, consider ways to discuss these categories with your committee members.

As your committee members discuss the Mark 3:31-35 passage, encourage them to think about how your community of faith behaves in relation to its pastor. Such an understanding will be invaluable as you prepare your description of the qualities you seek in a pastor. (If your deacons have not developed policies about weddings, funerals, and baptisms, you may want to encourage them to do so while your committee is in the midst of the search.)

1. The Family Church (Sunday morning attendance averages 0-50). This church community often has long-time leaders who have set the direction for the church’s ministry. The pastor is not expected to offer major new directions for leadership but rather to provide worship and pastoral care which is consistent with the well-established expectations of the church leaders. Serious conflict with a matriarch or patriarch usually will result in the departure of the pastor. Because of financial limitations, pastorates in family sized churches often are brief. Pastors who are willing to stay for an extended period of time will often find that they can bring about great change after the first five years of ministry. But they must first spend a great deal of time building trust.

2. The Pastoral Church (Sunday morning worship attendance averages 50-150). Most New Hampshire UCC congregations fall in this category. Clergy tend to be at the center of the organizational life of these churches. Working with a group of key lay leaders, the pastor is expected to provide strong leadership. Members look to the pastor to meet their personal spiritual needs, and the pastor is expected to have a personal relationship with every active participant. Clergy with strong interpersonal skills function especially well in this size congregation.

3. The Program Church (Sunday morning attendance averages 150-350). It is almost impossible for the pastor to know persons in depth in a church of this size. Hence new possibilities for spiritual growth and support are developed through a wide variety of program offerings. The primary connection individuals have with their church is not through the pastor but through some group—a committee, a study group, mission program. The pastor must step back in order for the work to be carried out by part-time program staff and dedicated volunteers. The pastor is responsible for motivating key lay leaders and coordinating the church’s overall work. Interpersonal skills are still important but so are administrative, organizational, and supervisory skills.

4. The Corporate Church (Sunday morning attendance averages over 350). Exceptional worship services characterize this size church. It will be noted for its excellent music program, its fine preaching, its creative worship. The pastor will have associates and assistants and the church will offer a wide variety of programs and activities. The multiple staff will carry out most of these ministries. People often choose this size church and sacrifice a personal relationship with the pastor in order to take advantage of such a wide range of opportunities. The senior pastor will need organizational and supervisory skills as well as a strong ability to delegate.*

* This description of the relationship between congregational size and styles of pastoral leadership is adapted from Appendix D (“How to Minister Effectively in Family, Pastoral, Program and Corporate Sized Churches”) of the book DISCERNING YOUR CONGREGATION’S FUTURE: A STRATEGIC AND SPIRITUAL APPROACH by Roy M. Oswald and Robert E. Friedrich, Jr. (Washington, DC: The Alban Institute, 1996) pp 147-167. These concepts were originally developed by Arlin Rothauge in a booklet published by the Episcopal Church Center in 1985, “Sizing Up a Congregation for New Member Ministry.”
Completing the first draft of your Local Church Profile has required both diligent individual work and teamwork. Data has been gathered and processed, questions have been discussed. Sometimes it has felt tedious, sometimes frustrating, occasionally very revealing. Some of the questions about congregational history and future goals should have received input from the entire membership. As you move toward completing the document, it will be vital that the material reflect the perspectives of the whole committee.

Truth telling is not easy. You want to present a positive view of your church because you want to attract strong and committed pastoral candidates. You do not want to be deceptive, and it is sometimes difficult to determine “how much” to tell. Every church experiences conflict. Every church has unpleasant “skeletons in the closet.” Discussions about your history and the process of describing that history in a written form will probably present some difficult moments for your committee; these discussions will also offer you the opportunity to create common understandings which will be very beneficial when you begin interviewing candidates.

Even as you seek to be candid about the not so good, perhaps even harmful events in your history, don’t forget to be proud of your achievements. Celebrating the work you do in the name of Christ is not bragging; rather it is witnessing to the power of Christ’s spirit working in your midst.

Read John 8:31-32

Share with one another what you think Jesus means by “If you continue in my word…”

Give some concrete examples of how the truth can set us free.

If a previous pastor has been asked to leave by your church leaders or your whole congregation, how do Jesus’ words apply to your perspective on that situation?

If a previous pastor has been involved in inappropriate or unethical behavior, how do Jesus’ words apply to your perspective on that situation?

Prayer: O God of truth, help us in our desire to take risks. Set us free from those things which bind us in order that we may be free for the new life Christ offers. Give us strength and courage to face difficult truths in order to free our church to follow your Son more fully. Let your peacefulness surround us even as we remember that Jesus did not avoid honest anger and confrontation. In our Savior’s name, Amen.
For your personal study, you may wish to read the entirety of John 8:12-59 where Jesus speaks of himself as the “light of the world.” Throughout this long exchange with religious leaders (who clearly misunderstand him) Jesus reflects a great deal of anger. This chapter is one of the most difficult in the New Testament. But if truth telling is a particularly painful and harsh reality for your congregation, it may be important to spend some additional time on exploration of the overall context of this passage.

The truth to which Jesus refers is not simply the opposite of lying; rather it is the revelation, the truth which saves, the totality of who Jesus is and what his presence on earth shows us about God. Likewise the concept of being set free reminds us of the way our failings, our sinfulness, enslave us. Jesus Christ is our truth. Jesus Christ sets us free. Because of that reality, we are challenged to confront every situation in our church where the absence of truth-telling can interfere with our relationship with Christ.

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If your church is currently being served by an intentional interim pastor, you might wish to invite him/her to this Bible study session. Remember that the interim pastor may be working on these same issues in other contexts; the discussion with your search committee could strengthen the pastoral ministry and help create an open and honest environment for the new pastor.
Facing Our Fears As We Move Forward

“The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?”
(Psalm 27:1, NRSV)

Read Psalm 27

Psalm 27 is both a cry for help from God and a song which reflects absolute trust in God. The psalm evokes a wide variety of emotions because it paradoxically acknowledges our deep fears and our absolute belief that God is with us. Even as we fear, God is our strength, and God will not abandon us in the midst of those fears. Take some time to read all of Psalm 27 aloud. You may want to identify the verse(s) which seem to speak most directly to your current committee discussions.

What are your greatest fears as you wait to receive applications for your position?

What are the greatest fears of the congregation?

If you have a recent pastorate which has been difficult, how does that history impact your fears?

Prayer: Strengthen us in the midst of our fears, O God. Remind us again and again that nothing can overwhelm us if we remember to turn to you. Give us courage to sing, give us joy as we embark—with you—on the next phase of our important work. Amen.
The 150 Psalms are actually ancient hymns, many of which were used in temple worship. Their words of hope speak to us across the centuries, and their laments and poems of despair offer a comfort in our grief. Despite their authorship thousands of years ago, their ongoing popularity reflects their contemporary themes. The writings are lyrical and cover a wide range of topics and situations: some were clearly written for royal events, others for times of war; many are designed to praise God and others to complain about God’s absence in time of trouble. They celebrate, give thanks, and call the community of Israel together for special occasions.

Many of the psalms are attributed to King David because he was well known as a musician. Although he certainly may have been the author of some, the collection was put together over a long period of time.

Psalm 27 is divided into three distinct sections: verses 1-6 reflect a deep trust in God even in the midst of fear and danger (these verses are somewhat similar to the opening lines of Psalm 23); verses 7-12 cry out for God's help in a situation where the writer appears to have been falsely accused or criticized; verses 13-14 represent a firm confidence that God will respond not only to the people in this particular situation but to all who wait and trust.

Because the first section is a song of trust and the second section a clear lament, some Biblical scholars believe that they were once separate psalms. For our purposes, the importance of this psalm is the fact that it captures the emotional “ups and downs” which your committee will experience during this lengthy process. There will be fears; there will be times when God seems very absent and you want to “cry out.” There will be moments of deep trust in God’s presence. And surely you know already that there will be a lot of waiting!

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Devotional Exercise

Because Psalm 27 is a deeply personal psalm, you may want to invite the Search Committee members to write about a personal fear on a piece of paper which can be folded and not read. As the committee reads the psalm together, members also can reflect on the personal fears which they have identified.
Reflections on Decision-making
(45-60 minutes)

"Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to
govern your people, able to discern
between good and evil....
(I Kings 3:9a, NSRV)

Read I Kings 3:3-14

You have now finished your congregational description, and your position is being advertised. Your committee will have a small break from its intense meeting schedule. During this period the Conference office will be mailing out your material and receiving profiles from interested candidates. It would be very helpful to convene at least one meeting during this period to devote to your own spiritual nurture. It also is an ideal time to come to agreement about the process you will follow in your decision-making.

Your committee now has an opportunity to reflect together on the wisdom that you will need to make careful decisions about candidates. Such wisdom comes from being attentive to the Holy Spirit and to one another. Wisdom in scripture is seen as a companion, a quality of the heart as well as the head. As Committee members, you may wish, like Solomon, to ask God to give you wise and discerning minds.

Reflect together briefly on this passage from I Kings. Then enter into a discussion, facilitated by your chaplain, of different patterns of decision-making. This “waiting period” is the perfect time to evaluate how you are working together, how you are listening to one another, and how you will make decisions. Think back to your first or your second meeting and spend some time evaluating how you are functioning now. After you have had discussion on this topic, focus on the following questions.

What do you understand the word “unanimity” to mean? Is it possible for someone to disagree with a particular decision and still support the work of the committee?

What are the dangers of “voting” on candidates and letting the majority rule?

What will you do if one member truly discerns God’s will in a way that is different from the others?

Prayer: When Solomon became king of Israel, his one request of God was that he be given “an understanding mind,” the wisdom to discern between good and evil. May

Solomon’s prayer be our prayer during this meeting, gracious God. Amen.
Chaplain’s Background Material

Your role as chaplain at this point in the process is an extremely important one. In 1 Corinthians 2:16, Paul speaks of having “the mind of Christ.” Church members, particularly in New England, often assume that the democratic principles which govern our nation can be transferred—automatically—into the decision-making processes of the church. The difficulty with that assumption is that most of our political decision-making is adversarial in nature; it creates winners and losers and does not bring a community together. If our goal in the church is to know “the mind of Christ” in the essential matter of selecting a new pastor, then it is important to look prayerfully at various options for making decisions. And it is important to spend time on this discussion before you begin reading profiles.

The process of “voting” on each candidate may lead to briefer meetings, but it probably will not help your committee come together and feel that decisions have been mutual. When votes are taken and parliamentary rules are followed, it is usually the most vocal and articulate people who speak out and dominate the meeting. Quieter, more reflective people will find their views lost in this process, and opinionated individuals may control the process.

There is no clearly recommended way for your committee to proceed with the establishment of its procedures for making decisions. But the scripture passage may point the members toward some help. It is God’s wisdom that you seek, God’s guidance, God’s wishes for this particular church. Whatever process the committee establishes must be focused on that goal and avoid the difficulty of opinionated individuals controlling the decisions.

You may want to consider one procedure which can be followed if a committee wishes to use a consensus model: a proposal is put forth, and each member indicates whether he/she (1) supports the proposal, (2) supports it with some reservations, (3) supports it although it is clearly not his/her first preference, and (4) cannot support the proposal. If anyone in the group is in the fourth category, then the group returns to further discussion until such time as no one is in the fourth category. Such a practice can honor everyone’s position while not creating “winners and losers.” However, consensus can sometimes lead to subtle intimidation of the dissenting person. Only prayer, patience, and continual vigilance can keep the committee healthy and faithful.
“Can you see anything?”

“I can see people, but they look like trees, walking.”

(Mark 8:24, NRSV)

Read Mark 8:22-26

This healing episode, recorded only in Mark’s gospel, is a peculiar little story. The man is indeed healed of his blindness, but the process is slow. His vision is restored in stages. Jesus seemed to need to take extra time to allow the man’s vision to develop; only then can the man see with absolute clarity.

So it is with the process of reading profiles. It is sometimes overwhelming, and there is a tendency to have difficulty differentiating among candidates. At times you may feel concerned about the lack of extensive parish experience among your candidates. Other times it is discouraging because there are few applicants, and their qualifications do not seem to match your expectations.

Reading and re-reading this little healing episode can be very instructive for your search committee. Even with Jesus’ best efforts, the man’s vision was still distorted. The healing took longer than expected. Even for Jesus, the process of carrying out God’s will was slow. Yet, at the end of this little account, the author of Mark says, “…he saw everything clearly.” Relying on God’s grace and guidance, so will you.

What can you learn from this story that will help you read profiles carefully?

What are the dangers of “rushing” the reading process, hurrying to find the “right” one?

How will you know when you have found candidates who seem to “fit” your church setting?

Prayer: Gracious God, we remember that your Son needed to take time with the blind man from Bethsaida before the man could see clearly. Give us patience. Give us wisdom. Give us insight. May we rely on you and you alone for our clarity of vision. In the name of the one who heals, even Jesus Christ our Savior, Amen.
This peculiar little story occurs only in the Gospel of Mark; likewise a somewhat similar healing of a deaf man (Mark 7:31-37) occurs only in Mark. All of the other healing stories recorded in Mark’s gospel (which was the earliest one written even though it does not appear first in our New Testament) also occur—in one form or another—in Matthew and/or Luke. One wonders if these two Marcan healings are not repeated in the other gospels because the authors considered them too crude. In both healings Jesus takes the person away privately; Jesus then uses spit, a common action used by healers of that time to drive away evil powers.

Our focus for the search committee is directed only to the story of the blind man. Even after Jesus attempted to heal him, he still had fuzzy vision. This passage has been selected intentionally because search committees often become worried at this stage in the process. There is sometimes an uneasy fear that they will make a mistake. Because of that concern, some committees tend to be too hesitant about studying profiles and eliminating those who are not appropriate matches. Others, fearing that they will make a mistake by not choosing “the perfect candidate,” discard too many profiles too quickly. Your committee may also have to deal with the sadness of losing an “exciting” candidate because the person accepts another position.

As the chaplain, you may be able to refer to this healing episode a number of different times during the profile reading process. The story is very reassuring. What does it mean for your committee members, when they are discouraged, to know that Jesus sometimes “didn’t get it right?” Jesus, too, made mistakes. Seeing people who looked like trees walking certainly was not an example of perfect vision. It is significant to note that Jesus simply tried again. “Once again he placed his hands on the man’s eyes,….” So too your committee members may need to be reminded that they must try “once again.”
Anticipating Seeing Candidates “Face to Face”

“...for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.”

(I Samuel 16:7, NRSV)

Read I Samuel 16: 1-13

Samuel was instructed by God to seek out the man named Jesse, a resident of Bethlehem, and to anoint one of his sons to be the new King of Israel. As the sons of Jesse paraded in front of Samuel, the prophet assumed that God would want him to anoint the tallest, the most handsome of the sons. But God said,

“Samuel, don’t think Eliab is the one just because he’s tall and handsome. He isn’t the one I have chosen. People judge others by what they look like, but I judge people by what is in their hearts.”

Each is rejected. Eventually Samuel asks Jesse to send for his last remaining son, a young boy who is taking care of the sheep. And he, David, is the one God chooses to be the new king.

One of the most difficult challenges during the interview process is treating candidates fairly. Sometimes it is difficult to determine what is in the heart of a person because we stumble over the person’s age, or gender, or race, or sexual orientation, or weight, or outer appearance. Each of us probably has a mental picture of the candidate we had imagined; then we are faced with the reality of interviewing individuals (or clergy couples) who may be quite different. Judging—not by outer appearance but by what is in the heart—is a great challenge and can only be done with wisdom and insight which comes from honest sharing with one another and prayerful time with God.

As you read the story from I Samuel, notice how the tension builds. Everyone is waiting. God wants Samuel to choose the one with the “right heart.” Eliab passes by. And Abinadab. And Shammah. And then four more unnamed sons pass by. And Samuel says, “The Lord has not chosen any of these.” The eighth son is summoned from the fields, and the whole group must have had to wait quite awhile for his arrival. Young, not a soldier, clearly inexperienced and unqualified, dirty, smelly, and yet God says, “…this is the one.”

God’s choice may be the unlikely candidate. It is a reminder of the importance of not rushing to a hasty decision and of praying for God’s guidance at this critical moment in your committee work.

How are you working together to make certain that shallow or discriminatory attitudes do not influence your decision-making?

Samuel had a clear advantage: God spoke directly to him and told him which person to anoint as king. How can we listen to God’s guidance when it may come to us in much more subtle ways?

Prayer: God of wisdom, you spoke to Samuel and guided him in the selection of a new leader for your people. So too speak to us in the silence of this moment and guide us in the selection of candidates for personal interviews. In the name of David’s son, Amen.
During your profile reading time, candidates have passed before your eyes… on paper. And soon they will do so in person, just as those tall, handsome sons of Jesse passed by in front of the prophet Samuel. And, like Samuel, your committee waits, a bit perplexed, wondering which woman or man will be chosen. Samuel had no idea which one God would choose, and Samuel was surprised when God’s choice was not the one Samuel had picked out. Your committee will struggle with that same tension as you deal with the preferences of each committee person while also listening carefully for God’s word. And God may surprise you by choosing the most unlikely candidate. Shepherds were notorious for being dirty and smelly, and even if David was a handsome young lad, he surely did not appear to be the one capable of governing an entire nation.

Your committee has worked diligently to identify the qualifications you seek in a pastor. As chaplain, you may want to nudge them to return—again and again—to those qualifications rather than to judge people on their charm.

For your own background reading, you may want to skim through some of the early chapters of I Samuel. You may remember that the prophet Samuel was the boy who was raised in the temple and was particularly chosen by God to serve as God’s prophet. Samuel served as prophet during a time when the people of Israel were involved in extensive wars with the Philistines. As Samuel grew older, the people began to ask for a king, and God selected Saul as the first king of Israel. Prior to that time, the strong focus of the people of Israel on their one and only God had meant that they did not wish to have an earthly king. They lived and worked in their 12 tribes and were ruled in a variety of ways. During the period of Saul’s reign, the people grew stronger and became more unified. Ambivalence about whether they should have a king, and whether God truly wanted them to have a king, pervades the story of Saul. Eventually God is portrayed as rejecting Saul; that situation sets the stage for the anointing of David, described in the above passage.

Although anointed in this story, David does not become king immediately. However, during his reign, the tribes are unified as a strong nation and the tension around “kingship” simply disappears from the Biblical narratives. It’s interesting to note that David never speaks in this story, although the text says that “the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward.” It’s fascinating to ponder what he must have thought about these bizarre events as he returned to his sheep.
The Challenge of Worshiping While Evaluating

“If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.”

(I Cor 13:1, NRSV)

Read I Corinthians 13

You will now hear selected candidates lead worship. In that process you will have an opportunity to evaluate their skills as liturgists and preachers. You will listen to the earnestness of their prayers and you face the challenge of being worshipful while also perceiving the pastor’s leadership from an evaluative stance. It will be important for you to enter into the worship experience as fully as possible; if you remain detached, you will miss the opportunity to know what it is like to truly worship in the context of this person’s leadership.

There is a saying among clergy which we need to bear in mind at this stage of the process: “Every pastor has at least ONE good sermon.” Church members always rank “good preaching” high on their list of qualifications, yet it is only one of the skills and gifts which you seek. The joke-telling, humorous preacher may indeed be amusing, but the entertaining, superficial style will not necessarily be helpful when a young church member has been killed in an automobile accident.

Some preachers are extroverted, others quiet and reflective. Some are gifted storytellers and others are skilled at “opening up” a scripture passage. Some preach from manuscripts, others from notes, still others with no notes at all. Some seem to reflect God’s love while others resemble a “noisy gong.” You will sense when someone truly is genuine. And you will have the joy of discovering that some candidates have the love of Christ so deeply internalized that it will radiate through all they say and do.

Paul’s words about the centrality of love are sometimes so familiar to us (from wedding services) that we lose sight of their power. The message of the centrality of love will help you in the process of evaluating the worship experiences you have shared with various candidates.

How can you tell if a preacher is “entertaining” you rather than proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ?

If love is the greatest of the three—faith, hope, and love—how do we evaluate candidates to determine whether they are truly loving human beings?

How do you experience love in a pastoral prayer, children’s sermon, or choice of hymns and liturgy?

How do you balance a pastor’s gifts for preaching/teaching/worship with gifts for administration, pastoral care, mission, and justice action?

Prayer: We are easily tempted, gracious God, to be swayed by superficial qualities. Help us to look for the inner faith and love which a worship leader demonstrates as we share together in singing your praises and honoring your name. Amen.
Little need be said about such familiar words. As chaplain you might find it interesting to read Paul’s entire section on spiritual gifts. (1 Corinthians chapters 12-14.) The poem which is found in chapter 13 is even more powerful when seen in the larger context of all the gifts Paul discusses. As you will discover, the use of the verses in the wedding service have caused us to hear Paul’s words as relating only to human love, particularly between husband and wife. In fact, when Paul says in 13:8 that “love never ends,” he is telling us something very profound about the nature of God’s relationship with us.

The love described in these verses is what we desire at the core of our churches. It is a love rooted in who God is and how God relates to us. And it is a “connectedness” with that love of God which you hope to experience in your pastoral candidates during worship.

J.B. Phillips translates verse four with these words, “Love always looks for a way to be constructive….” Perhaps this translation would be helpful to your search committee members as they go about their work.
The Work Is Completed

“O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give success to your servant today.”

(Neh 1:10-11a, NRSV)

Read Nehemiah 1:4-11

For the Old Testament figure, Nehemiah, the word “success” always referred to two distinct realities—one structural and the other religious. Nehemiah led a group of Hebrew exiles from Babylon back to Jerusalem where he personally spent many years supervising the overwhelming task of rebuilding the wall which had surrounded the entire city. As an administrator, Nehemiah obtained building material, dealt with complaints, and organized the workers so that some labored while others stood guard and offered protection against neighboring groups who resented the return of the Hebrews. The dedication of the wall represents the successful completion of Nehemiah’s administrative responsibilities.

But Nehemiah was equally concerned with rebuilding the ruins of the people’s religious community. Prayers and sacred observances had disappeared from the lives of the people; they had lost their awareness of their own faith traditions because they had lived for decades among people who worshiped many gods. Nehemiah prayed constantly for God’s active guidance in both “rebuilding” efforts. When he and the priest, Ezra, read portions of the laws of Moses to the assembled people, they all wept as they made a new commitment to their own faith heritage.

As you are about to choose your final candidate, spend a moment reflecting on the ways in which your community has been “rebuilt” during this interim time.

How do you want to approach God in prayer as you make this significant decision?

Do you feel that your work has come to a successful conclusion? And/or a faithful conclusion? How are the words different?

Assuming that your candidate accepts your offer, how can you—like Nehemiah—share with your congregation the role God played in your decision-making processes?

Are there issues of transition for your staff or your congregation which need continued rebuilding as you anticipate calling a new pastor?

Prayer: With gratitude, O God, we approach you this day. You have sustained and supported us through each step of our work. You have been our solid foundation as we have searched for pastoral leadership to help us rebuild, recommit, and move forward into your future. Surround us with your loving arms as we make this major decision, for we ask it in the name of Jesus the Christ. Amen.
In the year 587 BC, King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon conquered Jerusalem, destroyed the temple, and took most of the Hebrew population into exile in Babylon. The events leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem are recounted most fully in the book of the prophet Jeremiah. The people lived in this foreign land for more than 50 years; during that time many of them assimilated into the Babylonian nation, lost their Jewish religious traditions, and gradually became a less cohesive religious community. In spite of these changes, the yearning to return to their homeland never disappeared. A number of Old Testament books of prophecy were compiled during this time of exile, and they reflect this yearning. It is depicted by Ezekiel who used vivid oracles of hope to remind the people that God would restore Israel. (See especially the Valley of the Dry Bones, Ezekiel 37:1-14 with its words of despair, “Our bones are dried up, and hope is lost; we are cut off completely.”)

The process of the return of small groups of exiles to Jerusalem began about 50 years after Nebuchadrezzar’s conquest when King Cyrus of Persia defeated the Babylonians and allowed some survivors to return home. They faced an overwhelming task—rebuilding their homes, rebuilding their temple, rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem which protected them from enemy invasion, and rebuilding their own religious identity as a people devoted to worship of the God of Israel.

The story of that return and that rebuilding process is recounted in the Old Testament books of Ezra and Nehemiah; the books actually recount a long history of several periods of the gradual resettlement of the Jerusalem area. Throughout the writings, the message is clearly given that the rebuilding of the community is impossible apart from a renewed commitment to the law of God.

The account describing the return of the exiles culminates in the dedication service with a reading of the Mosaic law and a retelling of the long story of the history of the people of Israel as they moved out of slavery, into the promised land, and then eventually into exile. (Nehemiah 8 and 9). The reading of the law concludes with a renewal of their covenant with their God and the joyous dedication of the walls surrounding Jerusalem. (Nehemiah 12).

As your search committee prepares to conclude its negotiations with a candidate and inform the congregation, you will find yourselves in a similar situation to Ezra and Nehemiah. They led the work which then was turned over to the entire community of faith. It is the Hebrew people as a whole who renewed their commitment to God through an oral covenant. And it is your entire congregation which will vote to call the new pastor and affirm a covenant with him or her. Nehemiah prayed constantly for his work to be directed by God and to be “owned” by the whole community. And so too must your search committee pray as you begin to relinquish the unique role you have played in this entire process.
CONCLUDING YOUR SEARCH COMMITTEE WORK

A Time for Rejoicing

“I thank my God every time I remember you....”

Read Philippians 1:3-11

When the details of the letter of call have been finalized and the congregation has called the new pastor, your official work as a search committee is complete. You may find yourselves asking if there is anything else you should do.

Some search committees make an agreement with the new pastor to gather together at a specific time (three months after the beginning of the ministry, for example) to have an informal conversation and to ask “How is it going?” If your church does not have a pastoral relations committee, during the early weeks of the ministry your search committee could play a key role in advocating that such a committee be established.

In addition to making certain there is support for the new pastor, you will want to find a way to celebrate the work you have done together. Serving on a search committee is an intense experience! You have prayed together, laughed together, disagreed together, and sometimes cried together. Your faith has deepened, and your understanding of your own congregation has grown and changed.

Whether it is a potluck supper or some other informal gathering, you will want to seek out an opportunity to rejoice and to “debrief” your experience. As part of that closure time, read together Paul’s opening words in Philippians 1:3-11. Written from prison to parishioners he loved, Paul gives thanks for their faithfulness and expresses confidence that the work they have done in the name of Jesus Christ will be brought to a fruitful conclusion.

These words from his prayer may form an appropriate blessing for the conclusion of your work:

“...And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you determine what is best...having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.”

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This search committee material may not be reproduced without specific permission. I am grateful to The New Hampshire Conference for the sabbatical leave that provided the opportunity for the development of this resource.

Rev. Carole Carlson