

10 Mistakes

Pastoral Search
Committees Make



By Gene Roncone

10 Mistakes Made by Pastoral Search Committees

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The pastoral search process has its own share of challenges. Some of those challenges cannot be anticipated, but others can be avoided with a little bit of guidance. As a pastoral transition specialist leading a network of nearly 170 churches, I have coached many churches through the pastoral search process. Following are ten of the most common mistakes pastoral search committees make.

1. They do not plan for success. Many boards and pastoral search teams lack a “plan.”

However, when I say a plan, I am not talking about advice from a relative or notes from a missionary friend written on a napkin. I am talking about a real plan put down on paper to adopt, improve upon, or measure progress. Following are five things that make up a good pastoral transition plan:

- **A written plan** with structure, process, and action steps.
- **Expert coaching** from a trained person who has led multiple successful transitions.
- **Proven methods** that reflect current best practices and situational wisdom.
- **Practical steps** that enable a team to work sequentially through the process.
- **Relevant resources** that include sample letters, templates, podcasts, and examples.

Pride is almost always the biggest contributing factor. Many board members think their business or hiring experience immediately qualifies them to lead a pastoral search. First-class passengers may know the airline, crew, or even the layout of the plane well; but they have never been a pilot and would have a lot to learn before hiring one. That is why medium-sized churches historically make better decisions in this area than larger ones. The larger the church, the less likely they are to ask for help or seek coaching.

2. They do not prepare the church for the journey. A pastoral search is a journey that can either weaken or strengthen the church. Statistics show that most churches in transition experience a decline in morale, attendance, and giving. Instead of just accepting that, a sustainability initiative can help the church get out in front of those obstacles and defy gravity. A sustainability initiative is a month-long intentional process that calls the church to focused prayer, Sunday morning teaching, a congregational survey, small group engagement, and commitment grooming that can fortify morale, giving, and attendance. Knowing it is easier to make something better than to create it, I have developed a written plan called RISE UP that churches can improve upon or customize. It is available at www.generationcone.org.

3. They get ahead of the process. Many churches allow their anxiety and impatience to lead them into a premature start. They begin looking for candidates before they have done the heavy lifting at the front end which could have shaved months off their search process. Taking the time to start right with a strategic planning meeting, prayer focus, and a congregational survey and taking the time to collaborate on a good pastor and a church and community profile are often the differences between success and failure.

4. **They choose the wrong transitional leader.** When the pastor leaves, the board must choose a temporary team lead or chair. However, many boards often mistake strength of personality or conviction for strength of leadership. This can result in their choosing the wrong person as interim board chair. As a result, someone may be selected who lacks respect; is indecisive, too busy, not tech savvy; or is driven by a carnal ego. Remember, this is a spiritual process—not a corporate hiring activity.
5. **They do not schedule for success.** Not scheduling regular meetings is one of the biggest and most costly mistakes search committees make. If the search is going to be effective, weekly transition meetings apart from the board meetings where normal church issues are handled will be needed. A recurring meeting is needed on the same day and time each week rather than trying to pull meetings together every ten days or so. Everyone is busy, but a meeting schedule is needed to set the search committee up to win and protect them from procrastination and indecision. An example would be to have the normal monthly board meetings in addition to having the search committee meet every Wednesday from 6:30 to 7:30 p.m. The following meeting agenda template could be used as a guide (but not necessarily as a rule).

Pastoral Search Committee Meeting

- A. Prayer (5-10 minutes)
 - B. Meeting Objectives (5 minutes)
 - Specific tasks or objectives that must be accomplished in the meeting
 - C. Process Update (5-10 minutes)
 - A big picture update on what has transpired since the committee's last meeting
 - Where the church is in the pastoral search process
 - Any additional updates
 - Report of past actions (previous motions) or assignments to different individuals
 - D. Specific Updates (20-35 minutes)
 - Prayer focus
 - Churchwide updates
 - Candidate-specific updates
 - Résumé updates
 - Reference check updates
 - Recruitment updates
 - Candidate assignments to categories A, B, or C
 - E. Post Meeting Objectives (10-15 minutes)
 - Tasks to be assigned
 - Brainstorming
 - F. Closing Prayer (5 minutes)
6. **They procrastinate.** Procrastination, not demonic attacks, stalls more pastoral search efforts than anything else. Here are the common area where procrastination occurs.

- **Correspondence.** Not staying on top of emails, texts, or phone calls from candidates.
- **Milestones.** Procrastinating on important progress points (milestones) that result in giant leaps forward. Examples include things such as profile creation, personal interviews, reference checks, and a written remuneration package that the entire board has approved.
- **Insecurity.** Feeling unqualified to conduct interviews, talk with district superintendents, use of technology in order to move with speed and efficiency (older boards), or checking references.
- **Dealing with conflict** or misunderstandings that arise in the process. Pastoral search committees need to do what I call “stepping on baby crocodiles.” Instead of waiting until they grow into twenty-foot man eaters that require us to jump in the swamp and wrestle them. This usually involves dealing with divisive people, overly ambitious staff, and other team members drifting out of their lane.
- **Updating membership rosters** and freezing them immediately after the pastor has resigned rather than a week before the election of a new pastor.

7. **They lead instead of manage.** One of the temptations of a pastoral search committee is to overstep their boundaries or become addicted to their newfound power. They forget their role in the transition is more of a management role than a leadership role. If a board uses this microscopic window of transition as an opportunity to modify vision, make organizational changes, and take on additional expenses, they are writing a check they will be unable to clear. Their prime directive needs to be fourfold:
- Identify the most qualified, available, and willing candidate.
 - Remove obvious obstacles to immediate success, health, or growth.
 - Manage existing ministries and functions.
 - Create an opportunity for someone to lead with the wind at their back.

It is important for them to remember that their purpose is not to be change agents but to identify a candidate in a way that creates margin, options, and opportunity for their future leader. Sometimes that means fighting battles that need to be fought before—not after—the pastor arrives.

8. **They under communicate.** It is common for search committees to fail to keep the church informed weekly and to foster hope and optimism. Even if the search committee members think their last meeting was minor, it probably was not. An informed congregation is a trusting congregation.
9. **They blow interviews.** When a group of people from various backgrounds and vocations who have never served in a full-time ministry position are around a table interviewing a pastor, just about anything can happen—including sabotaging candidate interviews. The most common causes of this are usually:
- A lack of humility resulting in a candidate’s smelling pride and withdrawing—not to mention passing that information on to colleagues.
 - Confusing their personal preferences and needs with church priorities and needs.

- Forgetting they are representing the church and NOT themselves, a gender, race, age demographic, or ministry department.
- Missing divine interactions. Sometimes churches reject the things they need most; namely, innovative and relevant candidates.
- Not knowing how to ask behavioral questions. Asking the question, “Is evangelism important to you?” is nowhere nearly as effective as, “Tell us about one or two evangelistic events you have led this past month.” Behavioral questions ask for examples of what a person has done while situational questions ask only what they might do in the future.

10. Forget their purpose. A search committee’s job is not to pick the next pastor. That is the job God has given the membership to steward in the form of a vote. A pastoral search committee’s job is simpler than they might think. It is to identify and recommend to the congregation the most qualified, willing, and available candidate to lead their church into the future and then to pave the way in that critical time after a pastor is elected and for future momentum before they arrive.

A wise and humble pastoral search team will do well to avoid these pitfalls and humbly steward the trust that has been given to them.



Gene Roncone leads the Rocky Mountain Ministry Network and provides support, resourcing, and training for nearly 170 churches and 600 ministers serving over 44,000 constituents in Colorado and Utah. As a pastoral transition specialist, he has also written the Rise Up family of resources consisting of a pastoral transition manual, podcast channel, prayer focus, small group curriculum, and a book entitled, *Defying Gravity, How to Thrive in a Pastoral Transition*. Rise Up has become the most researched, comprehensive, and practical reference work on pastoral transitions available. The resources are updated annually and available at www.GeneRoncone.org/riseup.