

# 13 STAGES

## OF A SUCCESSFUL PASTORAL TRANSITION



A COMPANION RESOURCE TO THE  
RISE UP PASTORAL TRANSITION MANUAL  
BY GENE RONCONE



If you have ever flown over a city, you get a much broader view of its layout. That is why I want to give you a brief “birds eye view” of the entire pastoral search process. Over the decades, I imagine I have read hundreds of books, journal articles, manuals, and thesis papers on the pastoral selection process. Each has their own unique presentation of steps or phases of the process. However, every search has pre and post search tasks that must be completed to conclude a successful transition. That is why I have created my own list of 13 steps ranging from the moment a vacancy occurs to the new pastor arriving. Some take hours to complete and others, like interviewing, can take weeks. It is also important to understand that many steps will overlap each other instead of being confined in to neat and tidy compartments of time.

Although the search teams process will not always be linear and will require flexibility, it may help to identify the basic steps involved while determining a candidate. Because the search team will be meeting regularly to process information, make decisions, and strategize, it is possible for several stages to be happening at the same time. It should also be noted that the size and complexity of your church will also determine the scope of each step.

Following is a graphic summarizing each stage of the process outlined in the *Rise UP* pastoral transition reference manual. Then a brief description of each stage will be described in more detail.



This graphic can also be downloaded at [http://www.agspe.org/RU\\_13stages.pdf](http://www.agspe.org/RU_13stages.pdf)

## Stage 1: Pre-search Preparation

The best and most important way to begin this process is for the board to have two half-day planning meetings or a two-day retreat. Boards that avoid this in the interest of “being too busy” will find themselves victims to several stalls in the process. No meeting will be more important than this one because the board will use the *Rise Up* manual to determine roles, strategize, write up a church profile, job description, and profile of the “ideal candidate”, determine a search budget, and sign confidentiality/member agreements. The board officers should use the meeting template found in *Rise Up* to customize a structured meeting schedule and collaborate with the board to select a date that works best for everyone. Although it is preferred that all members be present, not everyone may be able to attend. To keep the process moving forward, the board will need to accept the fact that not all members will be able to participate in each segment of the process. However, the planning meeting/retreat is the most important meeting, and a venue that is close but feels far would serve best. See the *Rise Up* appendixes entitled “Board/Search Committee Planning Retreat,” “Desirable Qualities,” and “Search Budget” for a practical example of a planning meeting schedule. These resources are also available as customizable downloads in the “Digital Resources” section of the PDF version of the *Rise Up* manual.

In the meantime, it may help to alleviate any anxiety the staff or volunteers may have if the board were to send a letter expressing appreciation for their faithfulness and ask for their patience during this process. It is important, however, that this letter does not commit to securing employment or large initiatives requested by your team of staff or volunteers. Your new pastor must have the freedom to build their own team and finance new vision. See the *Rise Up* appendix entitled “Sample Letters” for an example that can be downloaded.

## Stage 2: Advertising the Opening

After the board has compiled the church profile and candidate profile, it is important to get the word out about your pastoral vacancy. This will help to maximize networking potential and get others working for you. It can be done by creating a shared internet folder, central website or blog informing influential people about the opening and posting it on several ministry job sites. See the *Rise Up* appendix entitled “Advertising Ministry Opening” for a list of options to accomplish this task.

## Stage 3: Seeking Counsel

At this stage, the board will need to seek input from your district superintendent/network pastor, community leaders, and the congregation. Scripture repeatedly teaches us that the best wisdom comes when people are humble enough to seek advice from knowledgeable advisors.

*The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, But a wise man is he who listens to counsel (Proverbs 12:15 NASB 1995).*

*Through insolence comes nothing but strife, But wisdom is with those who receive counsel (Proverbs 13:10 NASB 1995).*

*Where there is no guidance the people fall, But in abundance of counselors there is victory (Proverbs 11:14 NASB 1995).*

There are three important sources of advice and critical feedback that are needed early in the process.

- **District Superintendent/Network Pastor.** District superintendents/network pastors spend much of their time coaching churches and candidates through the pastoral selection process. Their wisdom and advice can spare the board and the church much heartache, regret, and wasted time. Be sure to notify them about the opening and invite the district superintendent/network pastor to a board meeting to give the board advice, offer resources, and answer questions. At some point, you will need technical advice about your church bylaws so emailing your district superintendent/network pastor a copy now will save time later.
- **Community leaders.** Important and actively engaged leaders in your community may also be able to help you determine what kind of church your community needs. While pastoring Highpoint, I used the following list of questions to interview city leaders every 2-3 years. This can be accomplished by sending an email like the following:

*Dear Community Leader:*

*Our church is presently in a leadership transition and searching for a new lead pastor. We believe in community engagement, and you were among a short list of community leaders we wanted to reach out to for input. We feel confident we have a handle on the spiritual qualities we are looking for but would value your input concerning the city's current and future needs. Would you mind replying to this email with brief answers to the following questions:*

- *What is the most pressing spiritual, personal, and social needs people have in our neighborhood?*
- *What gaps need to be filled in our city that only a faith-based work can do?*
- *How would you describe the city as a culture?*
- *What are our city's greatest needs?*
- *What are the greatest dangers or threats our city is facing?*
- *What are our greatest strengths as a city?*
- *What are ways you have seen our city change over the past five years?*
- *What significant needs do you think our city will have five years from now?*
- *What are the different subcultures that exist in our city?*
- *What needs do most organizations in our part of town feel unqualified for or unable to meet?*
- *From your perspective, how can a community-minded church best help our city?*

*Thank you for helping us better serve our community.*

*John Deacon, Chair of the Pastoral Search Committee  
First Assembly of God*

A customizable version of this letter can be downloaded from links in the *Rise UP* digital resources section. Emailing this list of questions to your mayor, city council members, police and fire chiefs, school superintendent, principals of nearby schools, and your city's neighborhood services departments will reveal needs most church people do not think about. While pastoring, I always looked forward to these responses and, even at times, felt convicted that they were unknown to us as a church. They will help you know the kind of spiritual leader you will need to make a true impact upon the community.

- **Congregational survey.** The board should also give the congregation the opportunity to submit input concerning the state of the church and pastoral selection. There are many advantages to this including:
  - **Peace.** People tend to be less anxious about change if they are part of the process.
  - **Equitability.** People will want a fair and equitable opportunity to express what is important to them.

- **Ownership.** People will be more likely to support the board’s final candidate if they have been given a voice in the process.
- **Cooperation.** The survey may reduce the amount of campaigning or lobbying within the church if people have been given the opportunity to voice their opinion.
- **Confirmation.** The results will be helpful in confirming, expanding, or challenging the board’s existing assumptions about what kind of pastor needed or wanted.

Taking a congregational survey or “self-study” is one of the best ways this can be done and is easily accomplished by creating an online survey in [www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com) or using the Rocky Mountain Ministry Networks free and customizable version. The network office has hired a statistician to create a customized survey for your church. It can be launched for free from our account or transferred to your own paid account with [surveymonkey.com](http://surveymonkey.com). It can be customized with your own logo, color scheme, and name. Result summaries are updated in real time and can be accessed anytime you desire. Please see the section entitled “Congregational Survey” in *Rise Up* for an example that has been used in other churches.<sup>1</sup>

#### Stage 4: Targeting Potential Candidates

Soon after the resignation announcement, the board will begin to receive recommendations of possible candidates and inquiries of interest. However, the board will also need to recruit effective candidates as well. This will require the board to initiate contact with potential candidates that were referred or recommended by others. It is important that every contact with a potential candidate be professional, organized, and show respect for their privacy. See the *Rise UP* appendix entitled “Recruiting Candidates” for suggestions on how to navigate this process.

**Stage 5: Receiving résumés.** If networking and advertising is done properly, the board of a church of over 300 should expect to receive anywhere from 40 to 70 résumés with 10-15 of them being promising candidates. Smaller or rural churches will receive proportionally fewer résumés. The board will then sort through the list and organizing candidate résumés in categories of A, B, and C.

**A** = Strong candidate to contact and explore.

**B** = Possible candidate to be revisited or considered later.

**C** = Unqualified or undesirable candidate to be notified immediately.

It is important that the board do this as a whole and have consensus on every name. This task should NOT be delegated to a smaller group. See the *Rise UP* appendix labeled “Categorizing and Evaluating Résumés” for additional information and form letters that can be downloaded.

#### Stage 6: Ministry Exposure and References

In this stage, members of the committee review résumés and internet links to sermons as well as any other helpful information about “A-List Candidates.” Because the lead pastor is the primary communicator in the church, it is important that the board be exposed to several of your “A-List” preaching and teaching ministry. See the *Rise Up* appendix labeled “Exposure to Speaking Ministry” for advice on what to look for as well as the one labeled “Checking References” for additional information and form letters that can be downloaded.



### **Stage 7: Preliminary Phone/Zoom Interview**

In this phase, members of the committee or a sub-committee interview potential candidate on the phone to assess qualifications and competency. See the two *Rise Up* appendixes entitled “Interview Questions” for suggested questions that candidates may ask boards and boards can ask candidates at this stage and others.

### **Stage 8: Video Interview with the Entire Committee**

In this stage, the board interviews potential candidates and their spouse using online meeting applications to gain additional personal, family, and ministry information. Gotomeeting.com ([www.gotomeeting.com](http://www.gotomeeting.com)), Apple Facetime (iPhone or iMac applications), Zoom ([www.zoom.com](http://www.zoom.com)), or Google Hangout (<https://hangouts.google.com>) all have free or affordable entry level options. See the two *Rise Up* appendixes entitled “Interview Questions” for suggested questions that candidates may ask boards and boards can ask candidates.

### **Stage 9: Contextual Visit**

In this phase, a member or small team visits the church where the candidate ministers to personally see, hear, and feel the candidate in real-time ministry. No contact should be made with the candidate, nor should they receive prior notice. It will be necessary for the committee to call the church and find out if the candidate will be preaching that Sunday and is not out of town or out of the pulpit. The team will also want to drive by the facility after hours to see how well things are kept up and get a feel for the life of the church. Author Tom Brennan echo’s the importance of this visit saying, “I am mystified by most pulpit committees in this respect. They peer into every corner of a man’s life, but it apparently never occurs to them to visit the church he is serving in now.”<sup>2</sup>

### **Stage 10: Personal Interviews**

The board should narrow down their list of potential candidates to two (2) or preferably three (3). Three is preferred as it provides a compromise candidate should the other two polarize the board in deliberation. These should be invited to visit with their spouse and family (at the church’s expense) to interview in person. This gives the board and their spouses and the candidate and their spouse the opportunity to meet as a group and interact together. There may be a temptation to minimize costs by using video conferencing instead of face-to-face interviews; however, experienced search firms have learned the hard way the price of cutting out face-to-face interviews. You cannot read body language, hesitation, or a person’s spirit over a phone or video interview.<sup>3</sup> It is also important that a candidate’s spouse be part of this interview process. See the *Rise Up* appendixes entitled “Three Personal Interviews” and “Interview Questions” for more information on this step.

### **Stage 11: Return Trip**

After interviewing two or three potential candidates, the board should narrow the options down to one primary candidate. The group may not be unanimous in their preference, but they should have consensus that this person is the best match for their profile and what the church needs at this time. The primary candidate will be invited to return with their family to meet the board and staff. During this time, they can ask any questions they would like as well as have free time to explore the city, tour ministry sites, spend time with staff, and get a “boots-on-the-ground” feel for the ministry and community. You should also be sure the remuneration agreement is printed,

agreed upon and signed by the candidate and the board. It is critical that you DO NOT invite the candidate to come unless a remuneration agreement has been agreed upon and signed. See the *Rise Up* appendix entitled “Interview Questions” for suggested questions and “Making an Offer” for a remuneration template at this stage and others.

### Stage 12: Official Candidacy

At this stage, the board invites their best candidate to return as the board’s nominee to meet key leaders, interact with the people, and be voted upon. See the *Rise Up* appendixes entitled “Presenting an Offer” and “Hosting the Candidate” for more information on logistical matters concerning this important step.

### Stage 13: Pre-Arrival Preparation

In the last phase, the board prepares for the arrival of the newly elected pastor and helps provide a smooth transition by planning for logistics. The board should also be prepared to provide an official letter confirming the candidate’s election, employment, and the total remuneration package (total of package not the details). This will assist your new first family with finding temporary housing. In addition, the board will also need to mobilize teams to help them move in, provide meals, prepare for a welcome day, and explain office logistics. It is critical that your new pastor not have to set up his office and do these things their first day in town. All the office preparations including computers with all needed programs, applications, and access; cell phone; keys; email; office orientation; and the unique needs for new pastor should already be in place. There is no better way to show your new pastor that you are committed to their success than to enable them to hit the ground running. See the *Rise UP* appendix entitled “Preparing for Pastor’s Arrival” for ideas on this step.

### Want More Info?

- **RISE UP FAMILY OF RESOURCES:** You can access the entire family of Rise Up pastoral transition and success resources at [www.generationone.org/riseup](http://www.generationone.org/riseup)
- **STAGES RESOURCE FOR ENTIRE CHURCH:** We have also provided a very brief introduction to this process to help educate the people in your church and help them have greater confidence and patience during the process. If you would also like to use a much shorter summary to educate your people, copy and paste the text below (with the link) to your bulletin or all-church email.

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE PASTORAL SEARCH PROCESS? Our church is experiencing a pastoral transition and you may be wondering what steps, resources and coaching our board or search committee will be utilizing. We are pleased to inform you that we are using the Rise Up pastoral transition resources. Rise Up is currently the most researched, comprehensive, and practical resources available. We have prepared an online document that answers a few questions you may have. Access it at: [http://www.agspe.org/20220725\\_13\\_Stages\\_Lay\\_Verson.pdf](http://www.agspe.org/20220725_13_Stages_Lay_Verson.pdf)

I’ll be praying for your church,

Gene Roncone  
Author of Rise Up Transition Resources

**Foot Notes:**

<sup>1</sup>Congregational survey adapted from one that Gene Roncone received from Wally Weber.

<sup>2</sup> Tom Brennan, *Next, A Manual for Pastoral Transitions*, Xulon Press, Maitland, FL, 2021, p. 98.

<sup>3</sup>William Vanderbloemen, *Search: The Pastoral Search Committee Handbook*, B&H Books, Nashville, 2016, p. 59.