

FASTER PASTOR?

by the Reverend Dr. Molly Dale Smith

Recently I received a copy of “A Faster Pastor” [an article by David Carlson in the Alban Institute’s fall 2008 journal](#). As the President of TMEC (Transitional Ministries in the Episcopal Church) I am always happy to see discussions about transitional ministry. Does the search process take too long? Yes, sometimes! But sometimes it is too short. While I have no experience as a deployment officer, I am both a trained Interim Pastor and a Search Consultant. In addition I have experienced the search process as a member of the congregation several times.

There is much to praise in Carlson’s comments. *The Questions for Reflection*, a side bar at the end of the article, are first rate. I would hope that every Search Committee would use these. Carlson puts forth six issues that in his opinion cause unwarranted delays in the Search Process. Carlson is “a Presbyterian executive who has consulted with hundreds of churches, pastors, and lay leaders during the last 18 years” so he certainly has the background. In this article I propose to respond to each of these.

1. Misplaced timing and purpose of mission study

My single biggest concern is Carlson’s first point: “misplaced timing and purpose of mission study.” He believes that transition is an inappropriate time for strategic planning and instead “I encourage congregations to do a very brief mission study, which essentially just says, ‘This is who we are’.” The Interim Ministry Network, from which many intentional interims have received their training, describes discovering new identity as one of the five key tasks for a congregation during the time of transition.

Perhaps this is merely a matter of semantics but clear understanding of identity is the first and most essential step in strategic planning. In my work as an Interim Pastor, I sometimes use the faulty metaphor of marriage. I point out that when someone is no longer married that person needs to discover who he/she is as a single person before entering into a new relationship. Likewise when “Mother Brown” leaves St. Swithin’s, the people need time to grieve her departure—no matter why she left. Then they need to discern who they are now. In both instances time is an essential part of the

discernment process. While I strongly disagree with Carlson that “a very brief mission study” can lead to clear identity, I do agree that this is not the time for a full strategic planning process.

2. Procedural delays in the congregation and judicatory

Carlson’s comments here seem more relevant to the Presbyterian process than to the Episcopal Church. In the four dioceses in which I have served as an interim I have not encountered this kind of hold up. The only “procedure” is the CDO form, which I view as helpful as it helps the congregation get clear and specific.

3. Inadequate functioning of the search committee as a functioning group

Carlson says that the Search Committee needs to know both “its head and its heart.” I agree. One of the problems I have encountered frequently in congregation in transition in transition is lack of trust. However, gaining this is not done quickly. As a Search Consultant, one of my first tasks is to begin the process of team building in the Search committee. I emphasize the word process because this does not happen overnight. All of Carlson’s comments regarding the forming of a committee are true. But saying something needs to happen does not make it happen. Lack of trust and harmony in the Search Committee may be the single most significant cause of failed searches.

4. Cumbersome techniques for the processing of dossiers

I agree that cumbersome procedures can overwhelm a committee. Like Carlson, I would like to see speedy reading of resumes and interviews. I have seen slow committee work result in lost candidates. Furthermore, the congregation does not need to interview every single priest who is looking for a new call--only one person is needed. Sometimes this happens because the committee members have no prior experience with this kind of work. They are doctors, plumbers, teachers, secretaries, etc. Choosing a new rector is most often a new experience. Further, if the trust is missing, as discussed above, each person will feel compelled to read every paragraph. And finally there is a tendency to rely on techniques of business and forget about reliance on the Holy Spirit.

5. Faulty assumptions (skills matching versus quality of performance)

Carlson encourages the committee to look at the overall person-the big picture- instead of focusing on the details of a skill match. Here I am in agreement with Carlson. When I am counseling committees and/or clergy I advise the telling of stories to illustrate skills. For example if the skill is “evangelism,” I would suggest that the committee ask the cleric to “tell us about a time when you were effective using your skill as an evangelist.” Thereby, the interview goes beyond a mere recital of skills to learning about the person.

6. Wrong framework (comparison shopping versus discernment of call)

Search Committees, as Carlson points out, can get so focused on the need to have the correct number of candidates that they don’t pay sufficient attention to the one excellent candidate they have. At one church the committee was to bring three candidates to the vestry for interviews before selecting the final candidate. When the vestry interviewed the first candidate, they all agreed that she was “it.” She was called that very night. And I want to add is still the rector of that church

Aside from my comments above, two important concerns surface. First, where is God? We “call” not hire a clergy person. All of our efforts are aimed at discerning God’s will for the congregation and then responding to our discernment of God’s will by calling a cleric to partner in ministry. This discernment works only when prayer is the very foundation on which we build. We are not HR people but we use the techniques of the business world in the accomplishing of our Spirit driven purpose. Second, there seems to be an underlying belief that using the correct procedures guarantee good results. Not only does that leave no room for the workings of the Spirit but this conveys the incorrect assumption that this is a “one size fits all process.”

Finally, my reflections on this article lead me to realize once again the importance of a trained Search Consultant. The Consultant can help the committee to develop that all important trust, can continually lift up the role of the Spirit and can help avoid the pitfalls described by Carlson.

William Bridges, in *Managing Transitions*, points out the wealth of possibilities for organizations during the time of transition. The Interim Ministry Network’s five developmental tasks for a congregation are keys to a

successful transition. These tasks have stood the tests of time and denominational differences. I would hate for a hasty search process to endanger a successful call. The congregation that has done its developmental work and taken the time for prayerful discernment is best equipped to call a priest who matches their needs and can be a partner in ministry, helping the congregation thrive.

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