

How to Lead a Pastoral Search During the COVID-19 Pandemic

By Molly Towne

We are living in unprecedented times. Some aspects of life, worship, and how we work together have come to a halt. Other tasks continue to move forward, though perhaps not in the way we envisioned. As COVID-19 began to spread more rapidly in North America and many state governments declared “stay home” orders, many churches were in the midst of pastoral searches. If you are a search

team member or chairperson, perhaps you'll find this information helpful as you seek to navigate these unknown waters.

Extend grace to your search team

First, you may be feeling frustrated that your pastoral search won't proceed in the way, or perhaps on the timeline, that you envisioned. It's healthy to acknowledge that frustration and disappointment with your team. You may also want to take some time to reflect on all of the "firsts" many of us are facing. As a society, we are navigating working from home, worshiping from home, and missing in-person interaction with loved ones and friends, all while balancing health concerns and caring for our families.

Some team members may have lost income, employment, or loved ones to this virus. For these reasons and others, people are facing a level of crisis that they could not have imagined a month or two ago. During this season, it is crucial to offer yourself and your team abundant grace. This will set the tone for healthier relationships and communication on the search team as you navigate this season together.

Overcoming technology and communication challenges

As you look for next steps in your pastoral search, your team may face challenges related to technology and communication. It is likely that you will not be able to utilize the church building for search team meetings for some time, so setting up video conferencing will be a key step in continuing to move the pastoral search forward. The Reformed Church in America staff has utilized [Zoom](#) for many years as a video conferencing platform, so that is one tool we can recommend. Zoom offers a few different plans and pricing options that should be able to accommodate the needs of a search team.

As with all new technology, people may need time to become acquainted with whichever video conferencing tool you choose. Your team will likely need to navigate challenges such as slow internet connections and finding quiet work-from-home spaces for meetings. You'll also want to take extra care during video meetings to make sure everyone has had a chance to share their thoughts. Some may find a video meeting an intimidating setting and will need extra prompting before speaking up. Throughout these months, continue making good use of email and phone calls to help your team stay on the same page.

Interviewing candidates

Perhaps you've reviewed some minister profiles or pastoral résumés that interest you, and you're ready to interview candidates. Many search teams have already moved to conducting first interviews via video call, typically with the search team gathered at the church building. Now that small group gatherings are not recommended, you'll all be joining the call from separate locations, so you'll want to establish clear guidelines and expectations for your team beforehand. Some general tips for conducting an interview over video call are listed here:

- Have the search team sign on early to make sure everyone is present and settled before the candidate arrives.
- Establish who will welcome everyone and get the interview started. Make a plan for who will ask the questions and in which order.
- Be aware that background noise may be distracting for the candidate (and your search team) during the interview, so it is best for everyone to remain muted unless it is their turn to speak.
- Do not attempt to move immediately from interviewing one candidate to another as you run the risk of the second candidate interrupting the first interview. This

can be avoided by establishing a time length for each interview, leaving ample time in between, and/or using a separate link or meeting ID for each interview.

- When you share the meeting link with the candidate, make sure they are aware of any instructions or guidelines you'd like them to adhere to during the interview.

For additional recommendations for conducting interviews via video conferencing, [read these tips](#) from Vanderbloemen Christian resources.

Introducing a candidate to the congregation

Some teams may have already identified a final candidate and were planning a candidating weekend when this pandemic struck. This is a very frustrating and difficult position to be in, as candidate weekends likely won't take place until travel restrictions, stay home orders, and large gathering limits are lifted. We do not recommend having the candidate record themselves leading worship from their home, for this will not be an adequate substitution for an official candidate visit. This will not give the congregation an accurate impression of the individual's worship leadership or presence. Leading worship over video is a totally new thing for most pastors, so we recommend waiting until it's possible to bring the candidate for an in-person worship experience.

We also want to caution your church against trying to schedule a candidate weekend too early, before it's clear when various restrictions related to this pandemic will be lifted. Paying attention to local news, recommendations from state and local governments, as well as the [Centers for Disease Control](#) and [Public Health Agency of Canada](#), will help your team determine when it will be safe to gather in-person for worship once again and introduce the candidate to the congregation.

Continue to trust God

Finally, let's acknowledge that none of this is easy. Leading a pastoral search on behalf of your congregation is a difficult undertaking even under ideal circumstances, so continuing to move your search forward during this pandemic is no easy task. This is a time for your congregation and search team to lean even more into prayer as you seek the Holy Spirit's leading in identifying the right person to lead your church in ministry. Rest in the knowledge that God continues to move and is ever present with us in this crisis.


*Trust in him at all times, you people;
pour out your hearts to him,
for God is our refuge.*

—Psalm 62:8.

You can find more resources for your congregation at the [Coronavirus Church Resource Center](#).

About the author

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