

# Avoiding Ministry Mismatches

*A Travel Free Learning Article*

By

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As a former denominational executive and now a coach/consultant, I see an increasing number of mismatches between ministers and congregations. That is, the characteristics of congregations and the situation in which it currently exists do not match the characteristics of the ministers who are being called to serve these congregations.

Whether we are talking about congregational polity, in which the call is largely a matter of negotiation between the congregation's search committee and an individual minister, or a connectional system in which a bishop or other middle judicatory official is responsible for the matchmaking, it seems that an increasing number of pastors are surprised by the realities of their new charge. The result is often a couple of years of struggle and stress followed by an unhappy parting of the ways.

Why does this happen more frequently than in the past? Perhaps greater frequency is an illusion and the rate of such mismatches is no more frequent than before. But, I suspect there are more instances than previously for a number of reasons. Among these is the fact that there are more generational and theological complications and conflict in congregations today. Age and social location make a huge difference in expectations and preferences in style and substance.

Another factor is the high anxiety found in so many institutions these days, including Christian congregations. As Peter Steinke points out, systemic anxiety tends to become focused on the most vulnerable in the community, and who is more vulnerable than a pastor who is dependent upon the congregation for his/her livelihood?

Of course, a major part of the problem may be in the naiveté of both search committees and pastors. "God will lead us/me to the right match." While I do believe God seeks to lead ministers to the right places and congregations to the right ministers, we all easily become distracted by our very personal hopes, fears and biases. Discernment can be tricky business.

Whether in a congregational system or a connectional system, how can a minister improve the likelihood of receiving and accepting a call to a congregation that is a good match? Here are several suggestions for ministerial candidates:

1. Explore the church web site thoroughly before an interview. This will suggest questions about the past, present and future of the congregation that will be important for you to ask at an interview and perhaps before an interview.
2. If there is not a history of the congregation online, ask for one to be mailed or e-mailed to you and read it carefully. What have been the conflicts that occurred in the congregation? Are those still being played out in any ways? What was the founding vision of the congregation, what is the current vision and how does it relate to the current context. If no current vision can be named, the vision is probably survival, which likely points to aimlessness or high institutional anxiety.
3. Talk to the middle judicatory representative (bishop, district superintendent, regional minister, etc.) and ask them what they think the current context of the congregation is and what his/her

hopes are for the next minister/leader. Of course, recognize that, like everyone, these folks have their own agenda which may or may not jive with the congregation's or yours. However, most middle judicatory executives work hard at understanding their congregations and some have witnessed many chapters in the lives of the congregations.

4. Talk to nearby pastors of the same denomination and of different denominations. What is their impression of the congregation and its history, openness and willingness to move forward in new ways?
5. Check the denominational yearbook figures for the past 20 years. Of course, yearbooks are sometimes filled with statistics that are primarily preachers' estimates rather than hard data. However, financial data usually provided by church treasurers or bookkeepers, are more precise, and so are more reliable. Thus, a rise or dip in membership numbers doesn't necessarily mean much unless it is accompanied by a corresponding rise or dip in average per capita giving and total annual income to the congregation. If you see a significant dip in any of the numbers in any given year or years, chances are these point to a serious conflict about which you will want to ask.
6. Don't hesitate to call previous pastors of the congregation and ask them about the congregation and their experience with it. If you get one significantly negative report, be sure to ask another previous pastor or two to see if the first report is collaborated or not. If you get two similarly negative reports, you had better take these seriously and ask more questions.
7. Go to an interview with a search committee prepared to *ask* questions as much as to *answer* questions. Let the committee chair know in advance that you have questions you would like to discuss with the committee so they will know to provide time.

The point is not to avoid congregations that have challenges. After all, what's the point of doing ministry if you are not interested in challenges, and who can find a congregation that has none? The point is to go into a congregation with your eyes wide open, having prepared as well as possible for that unique situation, and having assessed carefully whether your gifts and temperament are a good match for that congregation's challenges or not.

If you are in an appointment system and have no real say in the matter of where you will serve, it is still important for you to go into the situation with your eyes wide open so you know where the "trip wires" are, and what God may specifically be calling you there to accomplish.

## Important Things to Know

Dick Hamm is a Ministry Partner with The Columbia Partnership. He is also executive director for Christian Churches Together in the USA. His most recent book is ***Recreating the Church: Leadership for the Post-Modern Era***. He is available for speaking and coaching with leaders, congregations, denominations, and parachurch organizations.

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