

Confessions of a Professional Interviewer

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Abstract: During a time of transition I became a "pro" at interviewing for church transitions. How? By going through at least part of the pastoral selection process at over a dozen churches in less than two years. These experiences taught me some lessons about what the interviewing process means and how it can assist a candidate in determining the degree of "fit" with a new pastoral position.

It was awkward. Standing in a small circle of people at a convention, I realized that one of them was the new pastor of a church where I had interviewed. The tension grew along with our mutual recognition. To break it, someone asked me what I was doing these days. Grateful for the rescue, I quipped, "we interview professionally."

Little did I suspect those words would be prophetic. In almost two years since resigning a pastorate in New England I entered the selection process 28 times, leading to 14 interviews. These experiences ranged from brief conference calls to grueling, multi-day investigations. The interrogation methods varied from high-tech psychological testing to old-fashioned questions about the length of my sermons.

After so many dry runs I wondered what I was getting out of all of this besides the world's largest collection of church Constitutions. The answer is simply that I have turned "pro." (Anything over ten interviews qualifies you for professional status in my book.)

Flashier clothing and superior table manners are not what set apart the true professional. Rather, it is two guiding principles: 1) A candidate needs insight, not just information, and; 2) The most important questions are the ones I ask myself. Here are some leads to follow if you want to interview like the "pros."

- *There Are Answers In The Questions*

One of my first interviews went directly from the opening prayer to a request for my position on divorce and remarriage. From this sunny topic we plunged into another burning issue: where did I stand on serving coffee to the adult Sunday School? To my amazement the group was virtually on the edge of their folding chairs awaiting my reply. (I was for it.)

I could feel the tension among the Committee in the deathly silences preceding each of my answers. They were not so much interested in hearing my views as in determining which side could claim me as their own. One deacon drove the point home by asking if I were "progressive." Before I could respond he announced that a group (led by him) was prepared to leave the congregation if the next pastor did not do their bidding. The battle lines were drawn. I was in no-man's-land taking fire from both sides.

An amateur tends to worry only about how to respond to these thorny, no-win challenges. To a professional, however, these questions are an X-ray of the church's internal dynamics. This troubled group knew they were in a mess and wanted to see if I could get them out of it without making changes that would offend anyone. They were looking for a fireman, one who would not use too much water.

A highly organized Board began our interview by requesting my permission to tape the meeting. I granted it, but had the feeling I was being read my rights. It was no surprise, then, when one participant introduced himself as a criminal investigator. His "just the facts, Reverend" demeanor set the tone for the whole event. For the next two hours and 55 minutes my life was dissected by a carefully scripted set of no-nonsense questions. This grilling covered everything from my childhood to my aversion to deep-sea fishing. The last 5 minutes were reserved for my question.

A "third degree" format revealed more about them than about me. This Board felt they had something very special in their church and wanted to see if I was worthy to lead it. Only Rev. and Mrs. Wonderful would do. A cross-examination style interview was their way of screening out everyone else.

The questions asked point to a vital issue: *does this situation fit my giftedness?* Can I be a fireman, a trustee, a chaplain, a high-powered executive, a prophet or whatever type of pastor this congregation believes it needs? If I cannot answer this for myself then my replies to a Committee mean little.

- *There Are Followers Among The Leaders*

At every church we visited one person dominated the interview. This individual also tended to be the one doing the most to fill the vacuum left by the departing pastor. One church even hired their leading Board member to do administrative

work until a new minister arrived. Without fail, others looked to these opinion leaders to determine how they should react to my candidacy.

During one meeting, the chairman of the Board asked me scripted questions that took up 90% of the allotted time. His partners, most of whom arrived late, listened shyly to my answers while a secretary jotted them down on the same yellow legal tablet that held the comments of the other candidates.

Another Board was totally controlled by an older deacon who opened and closed in prayer, made speeches and asked about especially troublesome issues. His ally, the lone female participant, sat quietly through the entire evening except for rewarding me with an occasional, "that's a good answer." I got the sense that silence is not the same as a lack of influence. It may mean that the chain of command is so clear that nothing needs to be said aloud.

A Committee in a rural community fed us 30 minutes of "soft" questions like, "would you put new songs up on the overhead?" I was curious about the failure of this Board to probe me in any depth on specific issues. They seemed to have another agenda.

Built around a handful of powerful, ethnic families, the congregation had been dominated by these patriarchs since its inception. Pastors came and went, but these influential clans remained. When I asked about the receptivity of the community (and the church) to a new minister, one deacon described it as "Pighead USA." The Board was checking me out on behalf of the powers that be to determine if I would be sufficiently compliant.

The amateur wonders how to win over the powerful in order to get elected. However, observing the Committee leads a professional interviewer to ask: *can I work with those who have power in this church if I am elected?*

My vision may require influential people in the parish to give up a degree of control, learn to cooperate in new ways, or even be replaced. If these changes cannot be worked out, a good opportunity may turn into a quagmire. The nature of the interview itself will go a long way toward resolving this concern.

- *There Is Confusion In The Communication*

A perplexed deacon called one evening to invite me for an interview, but confessed he was having difficulty determining where I lived. This problem persisted despite the presence of my address at the very top of my resume. Another Pulpit Committee chair was frustrated for weeks by his inability to get me on the phone. A member of the same Committee contacted me in one try. The chairman had been dialing the wrong number religiously.

Carefully crafted resumes are supposed to prevent miscommunication. They do not always succeed. While dropping us off at our motel after an interview, a very relieved deacon thanked us for driving four and a half hours to answer questions for 60 minutes. I was pleased until I heard the reason: our face to face meeting had helped the Committee get over the impression my resume had created. A different Committee found the same document so intriguing they rushed to schedule a conference call and then asked me to candidate. Never having seen their faces, I would have been one service from the pastorate.

Early on, I assumed that communication problems could be corrected by supplying information. I would learn that a real "pro" never assumes anything--never. When a West Coast church asked for tapes I supplied several to illustrate the diversity of my preaching. Rather than being impressed, they were confused as to which style was the "real" one. Another group interpreted the diverse professional experiences listed on my resume (pastoring, writing, parachurch, etc.) not as versatility, but as proof that I was having trouble deciding what to do with my life. Several other committees viewed my graduate education with grave suspicion, fearing I had educated myself out from under the anointing.

A "pro" does not confuse information with insight. Piles of documents and cordial phone calls do not an understanding make. When things get moving too fast, the professional puts on the brakes and asks, *are they really understanding me, and am I really understanding them?* This is one form of insurance against being swept away by the excitement of the moment or the need for a change.

- *There Is Substance In The Style*

A "Last Supper" with members of the Pulpit Committee prefaced most of our formal interrogations. While waiting for our salads at one restaurant, a man from a blue-collar church stated that his group was "conservative." He illustrated this by recalling the fire that had erupted over scheduling fellowship meetings and the ugly church picnic that everyone was trying to forget.

When our dinners arrived, his wife confided to mine that she seldom attended the church since starting a new job as a nurse. In fact, she and her husband were considering leaving the fellowship to find a new one! I munched my Cajun shrimp and listened.

By treating these unpleasant incidents like "business as usual" our hosts were telling us something important. Their church had a culture of conflict. It was "conservative" in the sense that any attempt to engineer change started World War III. Knowing this, the large facility and attractive parsonage looked very different than they might have otherwise.

Later the same summer evening we were jammed into a too-small office with a perspiring Committee ready to put us to the test. As everyone got settled around

the standard-issue folding table, the chairman poured my wife's water glass half full. He instructed her curtly that when she finished that, she could have some more. After that remark, I could hardly wait to see the compensation package.

My wife's glass held more than ice water. It contained a question for us: *what is this church's theory of ministry?* The leadership of the no-water group felt that inconsistent pastors had stymied the congregation. In this small gesture they demonstrated that they were not about to extend themselves on behalf of another preacher. Even the prophet was not due a cup of cold water.

Their theory of ministry was simple: If a faithful person would only stick with it for the rest of his life, then things could really take off. Since the pastor was to do most of the work, very little else was necessary from their perspective.

A particularly energetic church with which we met complained of a lack of pastoral leadership while at the same time completely renovating a building to create a youth center! One deacon commented that they needed a "nice young man" like me to come in and work with them. Of course what he really meant was work *for* them. Their theory of ministry was that the church is a family business that employs the pastor.

Before accepting an assignment, even if I believe I can change things, this theory must be brought out into the open to become a factor in my decision-making. It will show up in the small things, the style in which the leaders do their job. Failing to discern it, I may be shocked later to discover that the very people it is designed to help ferociously resist my strategy.

- *There Are Professionals Answering to Amateurs*

I have compassion for Pulpit Committees. Wading through hours of phone calls, piles of resumes and mounds of tapes they seek the will of God game show style, by putting the contestants through their paces. A Search Committee chairman told me of receiving 85 resumes for a pastoral position. This field was narrowed to ten who supplied preaching tapes. And out of this group one man was selected--who rejected the offer. Months of effort had left the church without a pastor and the chairman "confused."

Facing pressure from the congregation and from the candidates, looking for a new minister is a tough assignment for a Board. The interview is a firebreak between the past and the future, a chance to "get it right" before going forward. Unfortunately, the average deacon I encountered had almost no preparation for the task. Many were more anxious during the interviews than I was!

Even those who thought they knew what they were doing probably did not. With no training, most Committee members fell back on their own experience, adopting a watered-down version of the interviews they had while searching for

their own jobs. One angry deacon even challenged me with some of the same questions his employer had asked!

Reliance on such limited background can make the selection process a little erratic. One well-meaning man interviewed us in English so broken that we could barely decipher his questions. A representative of a church in another state was delighted when I accepted the offer to meet with his Pulpit Committee.

The Chairman was not delighted when he called one-half hour later to tell me I was being "dis-invited" because a full slate of candidates had already been assembled. He was in a better mood two weeks later when he phoned to "re-invite" me. I had the sense that no business one earth would manage their hiring this way.

On the other end of the process, a church that had seen better days called to announce that, after our interview, I had not been selected to candidate. The reasons were carefully explained and best wishes expressed. Wrapping things up, the Chairman asked if I were disappointed. The answer: "No. And my son won't be either." He had called my father (a retired minister of the same name) and broken the bad news to him by mistake. Later the same evening the message was left on my answering machine, making me half of the only father and son team ever to be rejected by the same church on the same day.

While these blunders were frustrating at the time, they are a wonderful antidote to paranoia. Each one is a cue to ask this: *how much of what I have experienced can be chalked up to their inexperience?* Not everything means something. As a result, I do not have to spend the entire car trip home asking my wife, "what do you think he meant by *that?*" Being realistic can deflect some of the pressure during a profoundly stressful time.

An amateur sees interviewing as an adversarial process: a candidate runs the gauntlet to avoid disqualification; a Pulpit Committee tests the candidate's mettle to see if he deserves a shot at the big time. The Candidates motive is desperation for career advancement. The Committee's motive is fear of choosing the wrong person.

A professional sees interviewing as a team decision-making project. The aim is to determine if this is God's time for our two ministries to merge. For me, a merger occurred in my fourteenth attempt. Asking myself the right questions produced the right answers. When this happens, everyone wins.