



CBFNC MINISTERIAL TRANSITIONS

Tips on Ways to Interview Candidates

As you engage in the important work of discerning the right candidate to lead your congregation, it's essential to ensure that your interview process is professional, ethical, and free from bias. While many questions may seem harmless or even conversational, they may carry unintended biases, assumptions, or even legal risks. This document highlights inappropriate questions, explains why they can be problematic, and offers guidance on how to frame discussions in a way that fosters inclusivity and fairness.

Church pastor search teams often operate with a sense of familiarity and informality that can blur the lines between professional and personal inquiry. Unlike corporate or nonprofit hiring committees, church search teams are often composed of well-meaning volunteers who may not have formal HR training or experience in structured hiring processes. Because churches function as deeply relational communities, search teams sometimes feel entitled to ask deeply personal questions under the assumption that a pastor's private life is inherently tied to their ability to lead. This can lead to invasive questions about family, marital status, gender roles, health, and even political or social views—questions that would be unacceptable and legally risky in any other professional setting. Additionally, there is often an unspoken belief that “calling” and “fit” outweigh legal and ethical hiring norms, leading some churches to disregard best practices in favor of an intuitive, culture-driven approach. The result is a process that, while intended to be prayerful and discerning, can unintentionally alienate or disqualify candidates based on factors that have little to do with their spiritual leadership and effectiveness. Recognizing these blind spots is critical to ensuring a fair, inclusive, and professional search process that honors both the candidate and the congregation.

POSSIBLE BLIND SPOTS

Personal and Family Status

Churches often emphasize family life as a core value, which can unintentionally create bias toward married candidates with children. Asking “*Are you married?*” “*Do you have children?*” or “*How will your spouse support your ministry?*” assumes that a traditional family structure is necessary for effective pastoral leadership. This can exclude single, divorced, or widowed candidates and implies that their personal relationships define their calling. Instead, focus on their leadership, pastoral care, and spiritual vision.

Age and Experience (Ageism)

It can be easy to assume that older candidates lack the energy for ministry or that younger candidates lack wisdom and experience. Questions like “*How old are you?*” “*Do you have the energy for this role?*” or “*Are you experienced enough?*” reflect hidden biases about age rather than ability. Instead, ask about their vision for leading a multi-generational church and how they have navigated past ministry challenges.

Gender-Based and Sexist Questions

Churches with historical patterns of male leadership may not recognize the inherent bias in asking women *“How will you handle leading men?”* or *“Can a woman be an effective pastor?”* Similarly, assuming that a male pastor won't prioritize family life is another bias. These questions imply that gender determines leadership capability. Instead, focus on leadership philosophy and their approach to congregational care.

Race, Ethnicity, and Cultural Assumptions

A candidate's race or ethnicity should never be framed as a challenge to overcome. Questions like *“How will you handle being a minority in our congregation?”* or *“Will people accept you here?”* imply that racial identity, rather than spiritual leadership, is the main concern. Instead, focus on how they approach unity, diversity, and cross-cultural ministry.

Health, Disability, and Mental Well-Being

Questions like *“Do you have any medical conditions?”* *“Do you have the stamina for this job?”* or *“Have you ever struggled with mental health issues?”* may come from a place of concern but can be discriminatory. These questions can violate privacy and assume that physical or mental health challenges make someone unfit for leadership. Instead, ask how they practice self-care and sustain their ministry long-term.

Social Life, Personal Preferences, and Privacy

It may feel natural to ask about a pastor's personal life, but questions like *“Do you drink alcohol?”* *“Can we see your social media?”* or *“What do you do in your free time?”* can be invasive. They assume that a pastor's private life must align with personal expectations rather than church values. Instead, ask how they maintain a healthy balance between ministry and personal renewal.

Financial and Housing Inquiries

Churches may want to ensure that a candidate's financial situation aligns with the offered salary, but asking *“Does your spouse work?”* *“Do you have debt?”* or *“How much do you need to make?”* can be intrusive and discriminatory. Instead, keep the discussion professional by asking about salary expectations directly.

Political and Theological Litmus Tests

In a polarized society, it is tempting to ensure alignment with a candidate's views on social and political issues. Questions like *“How do you vote?”* *“Do you support [specific policy]?”* or *“Will you preach about [hot-button issue]?”* can make assumptions about their priorities and alienate candidates. Instead, ask how they navigate complex cultural conversations in a way that fosters unity and faithfulness to the gospel.

WHAT TO CONSIDER ASKING MINISTERIAL CANDIDATES

A pastor search process should be rooted in prayer, discernment, and respect. Many of these questions, while well-intended, can introduce unintended bias, create unnecessary barriers, and even pose legal risks. By focusing on a candidate's calling, theological alignment, leadership abilities, and vision, your team can foster a fair and welcoming search process that honors God and the mission of the church.

As you work toward selecting the right pastoral leader, it is essential to ask questions that honor the dignity of each candidate while discerning their calling, leadership abilities, and alignment with your church's mission. The following are thoughtful and insightful questions that foster meaningful dialogue without introducing bias, discrimination, or unnecessary invasiveness.

Calling and Theological Alignment

Instead of asking rigid doctrinal litmus test questions, focus on how the candidate understands and lives out their calling.

Try questions such as:

- *Can you share your personal journey of faith and what led you to pastoral ministry?*
- *How would you describe your theological perspective, and how does it shape your preaching and teaching?*
- *What do you believe is the church's role in addressing both spiritual and social concerns?*
- *How do you navigate theological differences within a diverse congregation?*

Leadership and Vision

Rather than assuming experience level based on age, focus on their leadership philosophy and ability to cast vision.

Try questions such as:

- *How have you led a congregation through a season of change or challenge?*
- *What is your vision for church growth—not just numerically, but spiritually and relationally?*
- *How do you approach decision-making and conflict resolution within church leadership?*
- *How do you equip and empower lay leaders and volunteers in the church?*

Congregational and Community Engagement

Instead of assuming the candidate must fit a specific cultural or demographic mold, focus on how they engage with diverse communities.

Try questions such as:

- *How do you build relationships and foster a sense of belonging in a congregation?*
- *How have you approached ministry in diverse or multi-generational settings?*
- *How do you balance the traditions of a church with the need for innovation and change?*
- *What strategies have you used to reach and engage people outside the church?*

Personal and Spiritual Well-Being

Rather than asking about private health matters, ask how they maintain their well-being in ministry.

Try questions such as:

- *What spiritual practices sustain you in your pastoral calling?*
- *How do you manage the emotional and spiritual challenges of ministry?*
- *How do you maintain healthy boundaries between your personal life and ministry responsibilities?*
- *Who are your sources of support and encouragement in ministry?*

Preaching and Teaching Style

Instead of assuming a "right" way to preach, explore their philosophy and approach.

Try questions such as:

- *How would you describe your preaching style?*
- *What factors shape how you decide what to preach on?*
- *How do you ensure your sermons are both biblically faithful and practically relevant?*
- *Can you share a sermon or teaching experience that was particularly meaningful to you?*

Conflict Resolution and Church Unity

Instead of prying into past church struggles, ask how they handle conflict and maintain unity.

Try questions such as:

- *How do you approach difficult conversations and disagreements in the church?*
- *Can you share an example of a time you helped navigate a conflict within a congregation?*
- *How do you foster a culture of respect, love, and unity within a diverse church body?*

Stewardship and Church Administration

Instead of making assumptions about finances, ask how they approach leadership responsibilities.

Try questions such as:

- *How do you ensure financial stewardship and accountability in the church?*
- *What role do you see for technology and innovation in church administration and outreach?*
- *How do you approach hiring, team development, and staff leadership?*

NOW GO FORTH

These questions provide a deeper, more insightful look into a candidate's spiritual leadership, vision, and character while avoiding bias, discrimination, or inappropriate invasiveness. By focusing on a pastor's calling, leadership philosophy, and ability to serve in a way that aligns with the church's mission, your search process will be more effective and meaningful.

May God guide your discernment as you seek the right shepherd for your congregation.

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