
FINDING A MINISTRY POSITION

by Pam Durso

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The Season of Searching

For many years now, I have spent time sitting by, listening to, constructing pro-con lists with, and advising ministry job seekers. Along the way, I have learned a few lessons that I hope have been and will be helpful to those in the search mode.

The first and perhaps most important step in finding a ministry position is discernment. I know, discernment seems like a given, one that shouldn't even have to be mentioned. After all, ministers and soon-to-be ministers "live" in the discernment mode, right? Our reality, however, is that our lives are often fast-paced and hectic. Sometimes there seems to be little time in our day or our week to pray, to seek God's leadership. Because of how busy we are, too often we initiate a ministry position search without taking time to do the hard work of discerning. Sending out resumes or applications without discernment is like writing a sermon without first reading the biblical text, taking an exam without studying, running a marathon without training, or building a house without laying the foundation. None of these scenarios will end well! Rushing to the end without preparation leaves us with poor sermons, bad grades, pulled muscles, and collapsed houses, and rushing to the end in the search for a ministry position results in poor judgments and bad fits. While there is no one-size fits all with regard to discernment, here are a few of the truths that I have learned along the way:

- Discernment is opening oneself to the spirit of God, seeking direction, listening for guidance, striving to hear and to follow.

- Discernment takes time. Seeking God often requires an investment of hours, days, weeks, months, and sometimes years. Few folks that I know receive instantaneous insight or spontaneous answers to the hard questions of life.
- Discernment requires quietness and perhaps even long periods of silence. Listening is always easier when there are fewer distractions, less noise.
- Discernment also requires conversations with family, friends, colleagues, and mentors. Hearing from God happens for many of us in community. We hear God best when we are listening to our wisest of friends and mentors.
- Discernment is an intentional spiritual discipline. Discernment does not just happen to us or for us. It requires thoughtfulness, a good-faith effort, and spiritual, emotional, and physical energy.
- As you enter this season of searching, pray, listen, ponder, talk, sit in silence, rest, absorb, discern. Discernment is the starting place, the first step, the foundation.

Owning Your Search

As an observer and a frequent coach of those who are seeking a ministry position, the most important advice that I now give is this: “This search is yours. No one is more interested in its outcome or invested in its success than you. So take ownership of your search. Don’t ask other people to do more work, spend more time, or put more effort into it than you do. This search is yours.” If you are about to begin the search process, you need to hear these hard words: Searching for a position is demanding, time consuming, and often labor intensive. It requires persistence and patience. The waiting will seem endless. The process can be grueling, and the disappointment can be devastating. The challenge of searching is true of most every profession. It is not unique to ministry, but the interweaving of faith, calling, and paid employment complicate ministry searches. So know going in that there will be discouraging days, weeks, and even months. Take time to prepare yourself spiritually and emotionally for the journey. A good preparation exercise for your search is to sit down and make some lists, take some notes.

- Make a list of your gifts, skills, interests, passions.
- Review those personality inventories and assessments you have taken such as the Myers Briggs, the Enneagram, and/or Strength Finders. If you haven’t taken these inventories lately, now is a good time to do that.
- Make a list of your values. What matters the most to you? What things don’t matter as much? Your list should include ministry “must haves” as well as geographical and financial hopes and dreams.
- What is your dream ministry position? What other ministry positions are of interest to you? What are your ministry strengths and gifts? What positions are you open to considering that might not be your “dream job?”

- Where do you want to live? Where are you willing to live? The Northeast, the Southwest, only your home state? Rural, urban, or suburban? Where would you be most comfortable? Where would you be most energized? How far is too far away for you from family and friends?
- What are your assets? Yes, your financial assets. How much money do you have saved? How much educational debt do you have? How much other debt do you have? Will you need a car in the next six months or a new laptop? What monthly budget have you been accustomed to living on?

Making these lists can be a helpful exercise at the start of your search. List making can provide clarity about what is important to you, what is necessary for you, and what compromises you might be willing to make.

Another step in preparation is to schedule conversations with your mentors, professors, ministers, and friends. Ask them for help in exploring your strengths and gifts. Ask them what they see as a good place, a good position, a good fit for you in ministry. Having respected members of your community help you process your own giftedness and skillsets can be especially helpful if you are better at verbal processing. Often times others see us more clearly than we see ourselves—especially in challenging or stressful periods of life, and by inviting others into your search, you have opportunity to ask them to pray with you and for you during the search process.

A final step in preparation is to consider finding a coach or mentor to be part of your search process. While coaches often charge fees that “poor” college or seminary students cannot afford, finding an affordable coach can be done. People who are training as coaches often need to accumulate coaching hours and do so at no cost. Or you might find a trusted professor or mentor who would be willing to serve as a sounding board, a listening year, an advisor during your search process. And find a few friends who are willing to be part of your journey, who will listen to your complaints about slow search committees or hear your frustration about the churches who never acknowledge your resume.

Don’t isolate yourself or try to do a search all by yourself. It is too challenging and sometimes too lengthy a process to do alone. Surround yourself with encouraging, helpful, and respected folks. After all, isn’t that what ministry is all about—journeying in community?

The Resume

A most critical step in looking for a ministry position is creating a resume. Your resume will be the first introduction a church will have to YOU, so be sure to put time and energy into crafting the very best resume you can.

Following are lessons I have learned along the way as one who has applied for positions, as one who has hired, and as one who is a frequent recommender and reference. All search committees have their own philosophy about resumes. Not everyone agrees about what to include or how long a resume should be. But if you are in serious search mode, you need to invest some time in learning about resume expectations. I hope this will be a good start in that learning process.

Begin at the beginning! So where should you even begin with a resume? My advice is this . . . create a “brag sheet.” When my daughter, Alex, was in college application mode, she requested recommendations from her high school teachers. Her Latin teacher's response was “Alex, send me your brag sheet.” Alex came home and said, “Mom, what's a brag sheet.” So we had a quick introduction at our house to brag sheets!

To create your brag sheet, list all the things you do well, successes you have had, accomplishments. List them all! Add to your list the offices you have held, the leadership roles you have filled—at your church and your school and in your community. Don't just list the jobs you have been hired for—but think broader about all the places you have served, volunteered, helped, shown up! Be creative and generous to yourself.

Do not hesitate in bragging on yourself! Do not undersell yourself. Be generous. Your brag sheet needs to reflect the very best of you. But also remember that in the end your resume needs to be truthful, factually correct, honest! Churches will fact check you so do not oversell yourself either. And never lie on your resume. NEVER.

With your brag sheet in hand, start building your basic resume. For help in knowing what to include, gather a collection of GOOD resumes. The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship provides some sample resumes, but you might also want to ask friends and successful candidates for theirs. Get to know what is being included in current resumes, and make sure your resume has all the right information and categories!

A general rule, and a good rule, is that resumes should be two pages long. Three at most. Make sure that the most important entries are on your first page—your education, your recent job history, and/or your ordination. Some candidates include a personal mission statement at the top of their resume. If you do include a statement, make sure it is a true reflection of your values but is also a well written and thoughtful. It should only be a sentence or two (not two paragraphs), and make sure it is a mission statement that in some way addresses the position for which you are applying.

One way to set yourself apart with your resume is to include a photo. If you do use a photo, make sure it is a professional looking one. Do not use a selfie. Do not use a blurry picture. Do not send a photo of you with your dog. And do not use a photo of yourself that is five or six years old. You need a recent picture. You don't have to spend big money on a photo session. If you have a friend with a good camera and little talent, ask them to take ten or twelve photos of you. If you do have a little money to spend, consider a high quality photo as an investment in your job search.

In the last few years, some candidates in search mode have created a video introduction, and they provide the link to that video on their resume. In our digital and visual world, creating a video introduction might set you apart from other candidates and allow a committee to see and hear you as they are sorting through resumes.

If you are new to ministry, your recent ministry positions may seem very empty, but fill it out with volunteer roles in which you have served. You have more experience in serving churches than you might think, and some of that service might be unpaid but still is important.

As you begin building your resume, make sure you use parallel construction, that is, use the same formatting for all parts and sections. In the section on ministry positions, be sure each entry has an identical format. If you have a description of job responsibilities and you use complete sentences in one entry, make sure every other entry has a description and includes complete sentences.

References. Who should you use as references? Do not underestimate the importance of the right references. Begin by creating a list of people to use: your favorite professor, your former youth minister, your current employer, a lay member at your church. If you are sending your own resume to churches, think about who would be the best reference. Having a person from that church's region or state might be helpful. Including both male and female reference names sends a message to churches that you are serious about gender diversity.

Your list also needs to reflect diversity in relationship and experience. Don't use just professors. You need a church leader on your list, and you might want to consider having a lay leader as well as a pastor. Do include people on your reference list who have seen you in action, who can provide detailed information about your work ethic, your ministry experience, and your readiness for leadership.

Make sure you contact the people who will be listed, and keep them updated during your search process. Do not, DO NOT list a person without asking their permission, and do not assume that once a reference, always a reference. A few years back I got a call out of the blue from a church, asking for information about one of their candidates. This person had listed me as a reference, but I had not seen her or talked with her in over five years. I didn't even know where she currently lived or where she was serving. It was an embarrassing conversation for me, but my lack of knowledge about her whereabouts was very telling for the search committee member who called me.

A good idea is to send your resume, cover letter, and a brag sheet to your references. Also, schedule a phone call with them, and fill them in about your search and your current life situation. Part of your job as you search is to help your references be prepared. So if churches will be calling them, let them know. They will be a better reference if they are expecting a phone call.

I often serve as a reference for former students and fellow ministers, and I have begun asking them to write their own recommendation letter from me. I then use their letter as a basis for my own. This exercise helps them think about their gifts, skills, and preparation for a position, and it helps me know that my letter is reflective of what they value and who they are. This exercise allows me as a recommender to write the best letter I can!

As a final step, copy edit and rework your resume until it is perfect. Be sure to spell check it! Make sure you have no grammatical mistakes. And double check all your facts, and THEN reread it again a few times after you think it is perfect. Only then should you send it out . . . and not to churches but to your former English professor or your favorite writing instructor. Ask them to review it and give you feedback. Ask for input about formatting. Ask for critique of the content. Make sure everything you send out has been proofread by others!

A professional and polished resume is necessary in the competitive ministry market, and search committees won't waste time on a messy, error-filled resume.

Another Alex lesson. During her senior year of high school, we visited Emory University as part of our college tour. At a "listening session," the admissions representative told us stories about students who wrote their "Why I Want to Attend Your College" Essay and included beautiful thoughts about why they wanted to attend Harvard or Vanderbilt. The lesson is this—if you are sending resumes yourself to churches, make sure that you are sending the right letter and right resume to the right church. Double check this! Do not send your First Baptist Church of Texas letter to First Baptist Church of Georgia. Mistakes happen, but do your best not to make this mistake!

The other lesson is to craft your resume for the position for which you are applying. A onesize fits all resume doesn't work well if you are the one sending it. Your resume needs to be position specific and carefully constructed for each position for which you apply. Doing this is time-consuming but critical!

Networking

If you play that word association game (you say a word and folks say the first words that come to mind) with a group of young ministers and use "networking" as your word, you might get these responses: "small talk," "manipulation," "schmoozing," "using other people for personal gain," and "being fake."

This happened to me once. I played this game while sitting in a circle with young Baptists, and their initial responses were so negative. Seems like networking doesn't have a very good

reputation--especially in some ministry circles. After all, ministers strive to be authentic and relational, genuine and transparent, and networking just doesn't seem like something a minister should be doing.

But as we sat in a circle that afternoon, I made the case (or at least I hope I made the case) that networking is essential to our lives as ministers. And this is what I argued: Ministry cannot be done alone. We need each other. We need wide and deep circles of support if we hope to minister over the course of a lifetime. We need friends on whom to call when we are hurting. We need mentors and seasoned ministers to seek out when we are in need of advice. We need peers with which to dream and colleagues with which to plan. We need connections when we begin to search for a new position. We need each other. Thus, to survive and thrive in ministry, we must establish healthy networks of support.

Given our dependence on each other, perhaps it is time for us to redefine networking and stop seeing it as distasteful and demeaning. So I offer you this new definition: Networking is bridge building, friendship creating, and relationship maintaining.

And yes, there are certain times in life in which networking is invaluable. Having connections is always helpful when searching for a ministry position. The more people you know, the more people who are willing to provide information, recommend, and be a reference--the more likely you will a position that is a good fit. Having a wide network also will bring leadership opportunities--invitations to serve on a board or a council, speak at an event, share your gifts. Networking will open doors to you that you did not even know existed and offer you chances to broaden your friendship circles and expand your vision of God's work.

So here are a few of my "rules" about healthy networking:

Healthy networking necessitates mutuality. Networking is a two-way street. You call on your network when you need help, BUT your network also calls on you for help. Giving flows both ways in healthy networks.

Healthy network requires showing up. You need to show up! So attend those meetings, conferences, services--even if going is inconvenient and even if you don't have the financial ability to travel, do it anyway. Find a way. Learn to travel on the cheap. Be willing to share a ride and a hotel room, pack your own food. And when you attend events, volunteer! Offer your help in passing out programs or assisting with the behind-the-scenes tasks. Leaders always, always remember those who keep showing up--the ones who aren't part of the program, the ones who are ready to help. Showing up is the foundation of healthy networking.

Healthy networking is built on acts of gratitude. Always remember to say "thank you," to send emails or texts or handwritten notes to those who took time for a conversation with you or gave you information about a new ministry position or wrote a recommendation letter for you. Saying thank you is especially important if you asked for help. If you requested someone to be

your reference or say a good word about you, BE SURE to say thank you. People will remember your expressions of gratitude, and they will be ready and very willing to help again if they know their help was genuinely appreciated.

Healthy networking involves some financial commitment. Discovering a networking community that fits with your vision or passions is life giving, and when you make that discovery and immerse yourself into this new community, be sure to support its work. And yes, I am talking about giving money! If your networking community is truly important to you and is a way to extend your ministry and your reach, GIVE! Make a donation. Sign up to be a donor. The gift does not have to be a large one. Contributions send a signal that you are serious, committed, and invested. Giving is part, a big part, of healthy networking.

Healthy networking demands civility. In the course of establishing networks, you will encounter people that you don't much like. You might run into that annoying person who asks inappropriate questions or shows you dozens of pictures of her cats. You might also find yourself sitting by that search committee member who once said to you those dreaded words, "Our committee is moving in another direction." The reality for most all of us, no matter how wide our networks are, is that we will find ourselves in uncomfortable situations and awkward conversations occasionally. Healthy networking practices teach us to not burn bridges. When a position doesn't work out, when you aren't the one called by the church, when you aren't the one asked to chair the committee, work hard, extremely hard, to maintain cordial relationships. It is the Christian thing to do! And it is the wise thing to do. Somewhere down the road, that pastor whose church didn't call you might be the person to recommend you for another position, that annoying seminary classmate may be the one who becomes a trusted colleague, and that pesky professor who gave you a B in her class might be a secondary reference for you. Healthy networking calls us to be on our best behavior with all God's children.

Knowing the Questions

So you have made it . . . there you sit in front of your computer screen, Skyping with a church committee, excited to finally have arrived at what you are sure is the perfect position for you. You are ready to take this new role on. You are feeling fabulous—confident, self-assured, prepared.

But then the questions start coming. Every member of the committee throws at a hardball question at you, and these are questions you haven't even thought about. Your hour-long interview ends with you drenched in sweat. You stare at the blank screen, trying hard not to cry or scream, knowing that you may have completely blown this one, wondering if they are still taking applications at your favorite Starbucks.

Interviewing can be stressful. Knowing what to expect helps, and whether your interview is online or in person, preparing is so important.

Thinking through the questions that might be asked, organizing your answers, practicing your answers out loud, setting up mock-interviews, and having some questions of your own to ask are just some of the ways you can get ready. So prepare!

To help with this process, Baptist Women in Ministry has interviewing resources. We have collected questions used by several churches during their recent searches. While the questions might not address the position for which you are interviewing, you can get ideas about what might be asked, what you can expect.

Take time to think through the questions. Jot down your responses and refine your replies. Read your notes out loud. Ask a trusted friend or colleague to pose the questions to you. Excellent interviewing skills are developed and can be developed, and excellent interviews often result in the much-desired job offer.

Would love to hear about your interview experiences—what worked, what didn't, what you have learned!

Your Search and Social Media

Social media is our new reality—and it matters more than you might imagine in a ministry search process. Your Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram accounts are THE FIRST significant introduction most search committees will have to you. They will read your cover letter, glance at your resume, skim over your references, AND then head straight to Google to see where all they can find you.

And when they find your account or accounts, the committee will look at ALL your photos, read through your statuses, check out your comments . . . so if you have a social media footprint, YOU need to go and review what you have posted and determine whether you have work to do, cleaning up your pages, deleting pictures, or adjusting your privacy settings. While social media is wonderful for sharing yourself and your views, the truth is that your postings can scare off the committee very easily. If you are applying for youth ministry positions and you have dozens of photos of you at college keg parties, a good many committees will quickly deposit your resume in the trash. If you are hoping to be a children's minister and you have posted "sexy" photos of yourself, some committees will question your professionalism and decide you might not be the appropriate one to nurture their preschoolers. If you are searching for a pastorate and you have posted strong political statements, the committee might deem you to be too intense or too inflammatory to lead their congregation and cross your name off the list.

For those who are overly active on Twitter, tweeting multiple times every hour, a committee will look at that and wonder if that is all you do . . . if that is all you will do should they call you to their church. For those who post photos of themselves two or three times a day on Facebook, a committee will see those pictures and wonder if perhaps you aren't a bit too self-absorbed to be a caring, giving minister. For those who get into extended and heated engagements with others and who hurl insults often, a committee will see that and decide that you are too angry, too hot-headed, too mean-spirited to be a good minister.

These conclusions may not be accurate. But whether right or wrong, this is our new reality. Your social media engagement is WHAT churches will see FIRST and judge hardest.

And sometimes, it isn't what you post. It is what you do not post. Just recently, I spoke with a young man who was turned down by a committee because he did not post Bible verses or inspiring memes on social media. Because social media is now so important and often confusing in the search process, take a critical look at what you are posting. Polish up your profile. Delete what you should delete. And take control of what you show to the world. What you post, what you tweet, it matters!

One of my friends, a young minister who has recently been through a successful search process, emailed me and wrote, "The attitude of 'well, that's who I am, if you don't like it, I'm not for you'" is not going to get you far in interviews or ministry in general." I think she is right. She then noted, "There are some churches that are more progressive and for whom political posts are fine, but it is certainly not true of the majority of Baptist churches. I remember cleaning up my Facebook page when I was interviewing . . . and adjusting privacy settings so that things I posted weren't available to people I didn't know. It's a fine balance of not hiding who you are, but also not turning committees off. I am certainly way more progressive than my church, but I have fallen in love with the people here and have found that I can meet them where they are without losing a sense of my own self."

Working hard on a cover letter, polishing up a resume, honing your interview skills—all of those are important, but your social media presence NEEDS your attention. Put your best self out there, and be mindful of your words, your activity on Facebook and Twitter and Instagram and . . . all those other ways of sharing information. Pay attention to what you are conveying to the world! It matters more than you think!

Pam Durso is the executive director of Baptist Women in Ministry, Atlanta, Georgia.



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