

SONAR SEARCH

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What is the Sonar Search?

Our Pastoral Search process to get the results the church wants consists of three separate and sequential steps: First, the Sonar Search; second, the Prospect Search, and then three, the Candidate Search.

The Sonar Search can be described in the metaphor of a fishing guide using a sonar fish-finder to locate where fish might be found under the surface, and how they are behaving. We are not yet looking for any specific fish; we do want to see where big fish might be found.

Networking is what this first step centers on. The consultant begins networking with colleagues to ask if they have suggestions of possibilities for a particular church. Over a few weeks we gather a list of names of pastors who may possibly match the ministry needs of a specific size and complexity of church.

The Sonar Search may also include names lifted up by the church's own members, clergy in the local area and even the bishop's cabinet may have some possibilities in mind as well. Note: the church's actual prospects and candidates may not come from this sonar list, but it never hurts to be looking.

- If the church and/or the bishop has publicly made it known there will be a pastoral change, the church is identified in the Sonar Search. However, if the church has not publicly announced its intentions, then the Sonar Search is 'stealth' and is done with no identifiers.... just a generic description, like "a large progressive church in the Midwest" for example.
- Either way it is akin to brainstorming names who may be a possibility. The Sonar Search begins before and continues while the church compiles its 'current reality' case statement and its 'values priorities' to be shared with sonar search pastors who may become prospects.
- No pastor whose name is lifted up is contacted during the sonar search; many won't ever be. After a cursory look at a church's website, YouTube channel, and UMC Data where a pastor is currently serving, the consultant will determine if there is benefit to solicit interest in becoming a 'prospect' for the church's position.
- After initial conversation with the pastor and if the consultant concludes the pastor might have affinity with the church, they are invited to become a 'prospect' ... not yet a candidate. Typically, less than 50% of names will move on to become actual prospects, which is the second step (*see the Prospect Search guidelines*).

In all cases our highest priority is to protect the confidentiality of any potential prospects and candidates. We only move forward through the three steps with the pastor's permission. We typically do not involve the bishop(s) in the Sonar Search because it isn't directly tied to any particular possibility. To avoid rumors and awkwardness we do inform the resident bishop when a pastor chooses to become a 'prospect' and move into the second step.

Starting Sonar Searches as soon as possible increases the odds at getting the results we want. A large-scale search is often unprecedented for many churches, and filled with unknowns that can require multiple good faith conversations to arrive at the best result. Constant conversations swirl around about larger church retirements and vacancies coming up, so through the sonar search we try to keep track of those conversations and keep up with fish movements and activities.

Sonar Search Preparation: When a church is facing a pastoral transition there is always a high degree of anxiety and uncertainty. Leadership approaches the transition in a variety of ways and to help mitigate that anxiety, we are often asked to help –with the blessing of the bishop--in the church's pastoral search. We proceed in three distinctive ways: (a) clarity; (b) focus; (c) results.

Clarity: Early in the Search/Transition process, church leadership will have been asked to prepare (1) an extensive "Church Current Reality" document spelling out an honest detailing of the church's real life present situation. This document includes stats, leadership interviews, the good & bad of the church's ministry and financial condition. Leadership will also clarify the church's 'values priorities' which detail the specs of what the church needs and desires in its new pastor. These two documents are intended to preemptively answer the questions of any pastor who may become a prospect and/or a candidate.

FOCUS: While we are getting clarity about the church's current reality and desired values of the new pastor, at the same time the SPR and the current pastor have been asked to form a specific group of leaders and influencers to FOCUS on the pastoral search. This team is sometimes called the 'Transition Team,' or the "Search Team" or something similar. It is the team with which the consultant works to focus on finding the right new pastor.

Results: Successfully accomplishing the three sequential steps of a pastoral search will result in increasing the odds of the right pastor being identified, recruited and appointed by the bishop.

A beloved pastor's retirement in the aftermath of Covid's impact, denominational transitions, and social polarization adds multiple dimensions to discovering and executing a path forward. It is a must that a Pastoral Search process results in the right successor be identified, recruited, and appointed. It is equally critical that the church be prepared for a significant "Passing of the Baton" through our Changeover Zone training.