Searching for a Pastor

Churches call pastors to facilitate the development of the ministry and mission of the church and its members. The search is for a pastor who brings the specific skills of preaching, teaching, communication, healing, counseling, administration and a personal commitment that will enable the church to carry out the mission to which God has called it.

**History and Background**

The Bible is full of stories of people called to particular forms of ministry. From the earliest days of the church there have been persons called out of the worshiping community for the purpose of performing specific tasks related to the well-being of that community. In their ordained ministry, these people bring to churches their extension of the ministry of Jesus and their commitment to help others carry out that ministry.

Pastors are called to a church because the church and the pastor feel that God is calling them to share ministry in that time and place.

In the United Church of Christ the process of searching for a pastor involves the local church and the association or conference. The church negotiates directly with candidates for the position, using profiles provided through the Parish Life and Leadership Team of Local Church Ministries.

Churches rarely think about the process of searching for a pastor until they are required to do so by an announcement that "at our next board meeting I am submitting my resignation." That kind of startling statement is the beginning of a process that probably will take several months and may take a year: the search for a pastor.

**Common Practices**

It is true that every church is different and has different requirements, but there are tested procedures that can make your search less painful than it might be otherwise. The procedures used by many churches in the United Church of Christ are outlined in a Local Church Seeks a Pastor [published by Parish Life and Leadership](https://www.parishlifeleadership.org/resources/local-church-seeks-a-pastor), which is available in your conference or through your association or conference placement office. You are encouraged to contact that person immediately following the resignation of the pastor to learn of procedures that your association or conference recommends.

When churches try to go it alone, they often settle for a pastor who is nearby and known but not necessarily well suited for the mission of that church. Working with a person familiar with the placement system of the United Church of Christ will give your church confidence that you will find a pastor and you won't feel so deserted. It will also probably help you find an interim pastor who can serve between the time your former pastor leaves and the new pastor arrives.

**Responsibilities**

Usually the governing board of the church receives the resignation of the pastor and assumes responsibility on behalf of the congregation for the search process. It appoints a search committee that carries out the search. If the search is for an associate pastor, many of the same procedures are used. The resource Calling an Additional Member to the Pastoral Staff published by Parish Life and Leadership, is helpful when calling an associate pastor. In addition, you will need clarity about the role of the senior pastor and how to involve him or her in the search process.

**Governing Board**

Usually the governing board is responsible for:
- Accepting the pastor's resignation.
- Notifying the congregation of the resignation.
- Contacting the conference or association placement office.
- Meeting with the appropriate conference staff person.
- Establishing a special relationship with the resigning pastor.
- Making interim plans.
- Preparing a local church profile that describes the church and the basis of decisions about what type of leader is desired.

**Search Committee**

Usually the search committee is responsible for:
- Selecting a chairperson and a secretary.
- Agreeing on basic understandings.
- Meeting with the appropriate conference staff person.
- Sending an informative letter to every household in the congregation.
- Carefully studying the congregational profile.
- Asking the governing board for a preliminary determination of salary and benefits.
- Setting a cut off date for receiving ministerial profiles.
- Keeping the congregation informed about its progress. There is a chart.
Searching for a Pastor

in A Local Church Seeks a Pastor

that can help keep progress visually
before the congregation.

• Asking each member of the
  committee to read every profile.
• Eliminating as many candidates as
  possible by a unanimous decision.
• Writing a letter to each candidate
  whom you are no longer
  considering.
• Sending each remaining candidate
  the church’s profile.
• Eliminating from the list any
  candidate no longer interested.
• Determining the agenda for inter-
  views with candidates.
• Selecting several candidates to
  interview.
• Calling the top candidates and
  telling them they are still being
  considered.
• Scheduling interviews.
• Ranking the Candidates
  interviewed.
• Selecting the top candidate.
• Assembling all available data and
  reports concerning the top
  candidate.
• Providing the data on the top
  candidate to the governing board.
• Recommending the candidate to
  the congregation by letter jointly
  with the governing board.
• Scheduling a time for the candidate
  to lead worship and meet members
  of the congregation and for a
  congregational vote to take place.
• Introducing the candidate to the
  governing board.

• Encouraging the congregation to
  meet the candidate when she or he
  leads worship.
• If the candidate is rejected,
  selecting another candidate.
• If the candidate is accepted and
  accepts the call, notifying all other
  candidates that the church has
  called a new pastor.

Shared Responsibilities

If the candidate accepts the call, there
are responsibilities that may be
shared by the governing board and
search committee or divided between
them. You will need to decide who is
responsible for:

• Notifying the congregation that the
call has been accepted.
• Notifying the association or
conference staff person you have
been working with that the call has
been accepted.
• Preparing for the arrival of your
new pastor.
• Introducing the new pastor to the
community.
• Welcoming every member of the
new pastor’s family.
• Forming a pastoral relations
committee See The Pastoral
Relations Committee, a booklet
from Parish Life and Leadership.
Order from United Church of
Christ Resources. Telephone, toll-
free, 800-537-3394.

• Making installation plans with the
new pastor and the association.

Ways to Increase Skills, Knowledge and
Effectiveness

• Learn how to hold a screening
interview. Your association or
conference staff contact person
should have guidelines published
by Parish Life and Leadership that
will help you.
• Use Calling an Additional
Member to the Pastoral Staff,
from Parish Life and Leadership,
when calling an associate pastor.
Order from United Church of
Christ Resources, 800-537-3394
• Learn about interim ministry by
talking to your conference staff.
• View the video “Sailing on Faith:
Look Who God Sent” with your
committee. Use the discussion
resource to help expand the ways in
which your search committee
might read and review ministerial
profiles, and help you discern who
God may be calling to your setting
for ministry. The video is available
through your conference or
association in DVD and VHS
formats.
• In the process of your search, use
“Biblical Resources for Search
Committees: Update” available for
download at www.ucc.org/
ministers or from your conference
or association. This resource will
guide your search committee to use
a scripturally-based process as you
affirm that God is an active part of
the search process.
• Talk to search committees in other
churches that have recently called a
pastor. Find out what helped and
what hindered their process.
• Use all available services offered
by placement staff from your
conference or association. They
will probably recommend using A
Local Church Seeks a Pastor,
from Parish Life and Leadership.
Order from United Church of
Christ Resources.
• Check out questions of standing or
ordination in Manual on Ministry:
Perspectives and Procedures for
Ecclesiastical Authorization of
Ministry. Ask your conference or
association placement officer to see
a copy or order from United
Church of Christ Resources 800-
537-3394. The manual is also

Issues Facing the Church

• Churches maintain that they want
the best person possible as their
pastor. Then they don’t seriously
consider women, persons with
disabilities, old or young persons or
persons who are of a different race.
How can you establish a policy that
will enable your church to be just
and open in its search and will help you find the person God is calling to serve in ministry with you?

- Not all churches or pastors are prepared for a full-time relationship. What could be the role of “tent-making” or bi-vocational ministries in your church setting?
- When other members of the staff are called, such as a director of Christian education, there is a question about whether the same procedures should be used. What do you think and why?

Questions

- What is your church’s position on affirmative action? Does it need attention?
- Who is the conference placement minister who would help your church?
- How can you make arrangements for an interim between long-term pastors?