

AN OVERVIEW OF THE SEARCH PROCESS

Theological Perspective of the Search Process

A model for the search process is provided by the Disciples in the book of Acts. One of the first tasks the disciples faced following Jesus' ascension was to name a replacement for Judas. The selection of Matthias is described in this manner:

“So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us— one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection.” So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. Then they prayed and said, ‘Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.’ And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles. *Acts 1:21-26*

A cursory glance at the passage suggests that all a congregation needs to do is to cast lots for a replacement leader. However, a more detailed examination of the text reveals three distinct steps taken by the disciples in their discernment process. These three steps are also set within the context of a specific purpose that structures and energizes their decision-making process.

Purpose

The disciples have a mission: to bear witness to the resurrection of Jesus. The reason for engaging in the search for a new apostle is to fulfill this mission. As consultants we have found that it is very rare for parishioners to know and be able to clearly state their congregation’s purpose or mission. When parishioners are able to readily articulate their purpose, their congregations are likely to be dynamic and growing. Conversely, when parishioners have little sense of their congregation’s purpose, they are easily demotivated and distracted into conflicts and personality clashes that have little to do with proclaiming the Gospel. A strong sense of purpose is also needed to guide the search process. It provides the basis for determining the skills and abilities that the rector will need in order to assist the congregation to successfully fulfill their mission.

From their sense of purpose the disciples derived three steps in their search process:

*You have to be
very careful
if you don't know
what you are looking for
because you may not
find it.
— Adapted from Yogi Berra*

*Without a vision
the people perish.
— Proverbs 29:18*

1. Setting the Search Criteria

The disciples begin their search process by establishing a set of criteria that would determine who is qualified for the position. The primary criteria was that the person had accompanied them throughout Jesus' ministry and witnessed Christ's resurrection. This criteria is essential to help them achieve their purpose of proclaiming the resurrection.

2. Assessing Potential Candidates

The disciples use the criteria to assess potential candidates. From their criteria-based search two persons are brought forward.

3. Discerning Who is Called

The disciples discern God's will through prayer and casting lots.

Creating the Search Process

We use this same purpose-centered three-step process to create our search process. Appreciative Inquiry-based strategies are used to clarify the congregation's purpose. Criteria setting and assessment are essentially objective and current personnel selection procedures can be adapted to set the criteria and assess skills and abilities. However, the third step of discernment is considerably more subjective and requires the use of intuitive processes rather than objective or analytic ones. It is important that these processes be done separately with the assessment being completed before the discernment. Trying to discern God's call from a list of candidates who do not have the necessary skills and abilities will result in turmoil and increases the risk of an inappropriate selection. The discernment process can only be entered into confidently when the committee knows that any one of the candidates could perform the rector's job if they are chosen.

To ensure that both the assessment and discernment tasks are accomplished appropriately we recommend that they be divided between the search committee and the vestry. The prime assignment of the search committee is the objective task of establishing a list of qualified candidates from which the vestry can discern who is called as the new rector. With regard to the discernment process, we propose using a covenant-relationship model rather than drawing lots. In this process the vestry prayerfully seeks to answer the question: "Can we as a parish enter into a relationship with this person as our rector? Can we together, under this person's leadership, behold the Goodness of God and seek to establish His kingdom?" Specific ways to assist in answering these relational questions are provided in this manual.

Clarifying purpose and the three steps of criteria setting, assessment, and discernment form the basis of the selection process in Assessing Skills and Discerning Calls.

*Assess skills before discerning a call.
A prayed-over turkey is still a turkey and is only good for Thanksgiving and not for preaching.*
