




# PASTORAL SEARCH AND TRANSITION GUIDE



**ASSISTING CONGREGATIONS IN SEASONS OF TRANSITION**



# PASTORAL SEARCH AND TRANSITION

We are so thankful that Jesus is, and will always be, the Head of the church.

In His sovereignty, God commissioned roles in the church. One such role is that of pastor. If your church has found itself searching for your next pastor (whether that be Head of Staff or Associate), ECO wants to offer this manual as a way to help you succeed in taking your Flourishing Next Step. We trust that this will be a hope-filled process. May God bless you as you seek His will.

This guide offers a path for churches, leading them from succession to the onboarding of their next pastor. We understand that each church reading this will be in a unique situation. Some might be looking into creating a succession plan for their current pastor. If that is you, then we suggest the ECO resource, [Succession Planning](#). Others might have a long-serving pastor retiring and are trying to create a pathway forward, but are unable to commit to a formal process. Perhaps your current pastor is being called elsewhere, and you need some guidance and direction. Another situation might be that your church is in an “emergency” situation as it faces a season of unplanned leadership transition.

In seasons of transition, many churches simply ask who the next pastor will be and seek to pass the baton from one leader to another. However, in order for a transition to be successful, a church must consider the overall health of the congregation, its leadership, and its effects on the upcoming season of transition. In an effort to prepare for these changes, ECO is working to help equip our churches—whether small, medium, or large—to prepare for these inevitable transitions. Whatever your situation, we commend this guide to you as a template for thinking through how you might search for and call your next pastor.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## OVERVIEW

VISUAL OVERVIEW OF PASTORAL SEARCH AND TRANSITION STEPS.....3

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## PASTORAL TRANSITION

OVERVIEW.....4

STEP ONE: RECEIVE THE NEWS THAT THE PASTOR IS LEAVING.....5-6

STEP TWO: SAY GOODBYE TO THE PASTOR &  
STEP THREE: ARRANGE FOR TEMPORARY SERVICE.....7

STEP FOUR: PLAN FOR TRANSITIONAL LEADERSHIP.....8-10

STEP FIVE: INSTALL TRANSITIONAL LEADERSHIP.....11

STEP SIX: ASSESS THE CURRENT AND FUTURE MISSION  
OF THE CONGREGATION.....12 - 13

STEP SEVEN: FORMATION THE PASTOR NOMINATING COMMITTEE (PNC).....14-15

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## PASTOR NOMINATING COMMITTEE (PNC) PROCESS

STEP ONE: FIRST MEETING OF THE PASTOR NOMINATING COMMITTEE (PNC).....16

STEP TWO: PASTORAL SEARCH PROCESS.....17-18

STEP THREE: PNC ASSESSES CANDIDATES.....19-20

STEP FOUR: NARROWING DOWN THE OPTIONS.....21

STEP FIVE: VIRTUAL INTERVIEWS.....22

STEP SIX: IN-PERSON INTERVIEWS.....23-24

STEP SEVEN: MAKING THE CHOICE.....25

STEP EIGHT: INTRODUCTIONS &  
STEP NINE: CONGREGATIONAL MEETING.....26

STEP TEN: CELEBRATE.....27-28

CONCLUSION & ADDITIONAL RESOURCES .....29

VISUAL OVERVIEW OF

# THE PASTORAL SEARCH AND TRANSITION PROCESS



● **OUTGOING PASTOR ANNOUNCES DEPARTURE**



● **CHURCH SESSION AND PRESBYTERY MPT CREATE A TRANSITION PLAN**



● **THE CONGREGATION AND ITS SESSION DISCERNS GOD'S PREFERRED FUTURE FOR THE CHURCH**



● **SELECTION AND FORMATION OF THE PASTOR NOMINATING COMMITTEE (PNC)**



● **PNC CREATES PROFILES: FINALIZE CHURCH AND PASTOR POSITIONS**



● **PNC SEARCHES FOR AND SELECTS A PASTOR**



● **CONGREGATION AND PRESBYTERY AFFIRMS THE PNC'S SELECTION**



● **CONGREGATION WELCOMES NEW PASTOR**



● **PNC AND CHURCH SESSION ONBOARDS NEW PASTOR**

# PASTORAL TRANSITION

ECO desires to empower and equip local churches to flourish and make disciples in all seasons.

Avoid succumbing to the tyranny of the urgent. Congregations tend to consider the time between installed pastors as “interim.” Instead, think about this time as “transitional.” As you prepare your congregation for its next pastor, it may be helpful to envision the transitional time as tilling the soil. This way, when the new pastor arrives, he or she can plant in fertile ground.

The pastor has announced that God is calling her or him on to a new ministry. This may be expected or unexpected. It may be a relief, or it may be some of the saddest news you have ever heard. The reality is that the loss of a pastor often throws a congregation into emotional turmoil. Sometimes circumstances or individuals force the pastor to leave. Sometimes a dearly loved pastor moves to a new congregation or retires. And then there are the more unfortunate situations, such as a moral failure or death. Regardless of how it happens, a pastoral transition thrusts a congregation into a unique journey through change and loss.

Many people in congregations tend to deny rather than identify or understand the emotions of loss churning under the church’s surface. For this reason, ECO has assembled a variety of resources to support churches during pastoral transitions. For some congregations they will need succession planning, others will need a Certified Transitional Pastor, many will need resources to help the session evaluate its systems and overall mission. ECO knows that every congregation is unique and may require different resources for their particular pastoral transition. Your presbytery and Synod Staff are available to help answer your questions.

You may need to consider planning ahead, in which case the “[Succession Planning](#)” resource would be most helpful. No matter your path of transition or what your church is facing, you cannot afford to skip the important steps of preparing the session, staff, and congregation for such times. This way, a change in leadership will be a smoother process when it comes. Most of our presbyteries know how vital these tools are for the success of our local churches, and are more than willing to help subsidize the costs. In some cases, ECO can establish payments and installments based on levels of need.

We believe structural health is the key to a successful transition. It is essential to designate time to assess the health of your church and its leadership. ECO Certified Transitional Pastors are trained in assessing the structural health of churches. [Click here](#) for more information about the ECO Certified Transitional Pastor network. ECO recognizes that Succession Planning is not always a luxury afforded to you, so we hope that the rest of this section will support churches in a variety of circumstances.



# STEP 1

## RECEIVE THE NEWS THAT THE PASTOR IS LEAVING

Helpless. That is how many feel when they hear the news that their pastor is leaving. It is no mistake that this step of receiving the news that a pastor is leaving sounds so passive. The challenge at this moment is to rise above the surface of that helplessness and embrace the opportunities to shape how this step transpires.

The Ministry Partnership Team (MPT) of your presbytery has been through pastoral transitions with other congregations and has the experience to help you. To locate your local ECO presbytery, [click here](#). Contact them right away to find out what needs to be done as your pastor leaves so they can support your church in this important time of leadership transition.



Pastoral ministry often involves a web of connections throughout a community that extends far beyond the church. Think well about how this transition affects the wider community beyond the church. Churches are tempted to turn inward during a pastoral transition. This is your chance to rise above that tendency and look for ways to keep the church's focus on our main goal: making disciples of Jesus Christ.

A session ought to consider:

### EXIT INTERVIEW

- When employees have contributed to the thriving of an organization, it makes sense to glean their insights as they leave employment with the organization. This is especially true of the unique nature of how pastors lead churches. An exit interview is an extended conversation about missional goals, successful seasons of discipleship, and areas of disappointment or failure.
- A structured interview in a formal setting for an exit interview is not necessarily best. Instead, the session may want to take the pastor out to dinner and spend an extended evening listening and sharing stories about what went well, what went poorly, and how the pastor sees the current health of the congregation.

## INVENTORY OF KNOWLEDGE

- Often the departing pastor has moved onward to his or her new call before the new transitional leader arrives. Pastors carry around a great deal of knowledge — everything from specific pastoral concerns to mundane details like where the light switch is located in the closet behind the sanctuary. It makes sense to create a running list of various pieces of information in the time frame allotted before the pastor actually leaves.

## WRITTEN CLOSING OF CALL DOCUMENT

- Many things need to be in writing as the pastor's call is concluded. Your presbytery's MPT will have policies about the separation and the details that need to be put in writing and signed by the appropriate parties. Though it might not be easy to discuss, questions of compensation for unused vacation time, the termination of health care and retirement payments, and a multitude of other issues should be addressed and put in writing. Again, your MPT will have guidance pertaining to these matters available for you to use. [Click here](#) to see what should be included and/or considered.



## DISSOLUTION OF A CALL

It is vital that the pastoral transition is done as well as possible given your circumstances. You will want to have your presbytery's Ministry Partnership Team involved in this process. Your presbytery MPT wants to provide you assistance throughout the transition and search process. To be abundantly clear, the MPT should be involved in both the dissolution of a pastoral call and the search and installation of a new pastor (whether that be Head of Staff or Associate). [Here is a sample agenda](#) for a congregational meeting to dissolve the call of your current pastor. In ECO, Terms of Call and Terms of Separation do not need to be voted on by a congregation unless required by church policy and/or the church bylaws.



## STEP 2 | SAY GOODBYE TO THE PASTOR

It all began with excitement and high hopes. Convinced that God was calling the pastor to your church for the sake of his glory, your church said, “We want you to be our pastor.” Now, after many ups and downs, twists and turns, that call is coming to an inevitable close.

It may be very disappointing that the pastor is leaving. It may also be very disappointing that the pastor stayed too long through so many difficult seasons! Either way, there are good ways to say goodbye.

Don’t overlook others beyond the pastor who must say goodbye. This may be an emotional time for family members and others who may leave the congregation when the pastor leaves. Saying goodbye well frees everyone to move towards God’s next steps in healthy ways.

## STEP 3 | ARRANGE FOR TEMPORARY SERVICE

Sunday just has a way of coming every seven days. How will the church address all the immediate needs, such as pulpit supply and pastoral care? The hope is that the initial phase of transition won’t last too long and soon a stable plan for transition will be in place. Your MPT may be able to help you fill the need for preaching on a temporary basis.



# STEP 4 | PLAN FOR TRANSITIONAL LEADERSHIP

There are many reasons why a rapidly hired replacement pastor could be disastrous. Take a moment to consider what is actually happening in a pastoral transition. When a pastor leaves a congregation, an array of changes are set in motion.

These changes are outside of the ordinary awareness of congregational leaders. While the powerful implications of the changes are often obvious to an outside observer, such as a Transitional Pastor, most participants in the congregation commonly miss them.

That is why the observations of a Transitional Pastor are vital at this time. In fact, the most vital job of a transitional leader may be, beyond providing basic essential pastoral service, to identify strengths and weaknesses of a local congregation's structures and leadership.

## What typically happens when a pastor leaves:

### 1 A LEADERSHIP VACUUM DEVELOPS

Whenever a pastor leaves, a significant leadership vacuum emerges. In some ways this is good because all organizations can potentially benefit from the reconsideration of decision-making processes. The vitality of lay leadership on display at the beginning of a transition can be impressive. A certain kind of energy is initially present as church leaders respond to the challenge.

However, the leadership vacuum soon gives way to chaos. It may be a creative chaos, but chaos is never comfortable. The potential for great damage looms large. Churches unconsciously form themselves around the leadership style of their pastor. If they don't see this in themselves, they won't understand why things are different after that pastor has left.

## 2 THE PEOPLE OF THE CONGREGATION ARE GRIEVING THE LOSS OF THEIR PASTOR

This grief is similar to all grief that comes from loss, and yet the unique nature of a pastoral relationship makes this grief different in some ways. People don't always recognize their emotions as grief, and they tend to start looking for something, or someone, to blame for that unnamed sadness inside. That blame often lands on someone else in the system who is also grieving. A Transitional Pastor can make a difference in how grief is managed and worked through by individuals and the congregation as a whole.

When people are experiencing grief from the loss of a pastor, several things can happen that are difficult to address:

- Misplaced anger
- Irrational fear
- Avoidance body language
- Impatience
- Attempts to fill the empty space
- Emotional regression/irrationally high standards for staff and others
- Stirred-up controversy
- Impulsive lunges toward nostalgic events or programs

## PLANNING FOR TRANSITIONAL LEADERSHIP

Congregations need pastoral leaders who are willing and able to take on the vocation of leading a congregation through all of this transition, loss, and change. In the past, this has sometimes been envisioned as a Transitional Pastor who "fills in" while the church is looking for a new pastor. This vision is far too passive and naïve about the emotional dynamics lurking under the surface of a congregation in flux.

The ability to effectively navigate the waters of a pastoral transition may be the single best indication of a congregation's long-term health. The loss of a pastor is a test of faith regardless of the circumstances of that pastor's departure. If the pastor leaves after a golden age of growth and dynamic ministry, then the test is to believe that all of those blessings were a gift from God rather than the result of his or her personality. If the pastor is leaving under duress because things weren't going very well, then the transition time is best navigated as a time of faithful soul-searching. Patience is required to avoid making a leap toward new leadership that might deaden the pain of the past but leave the underlying problems in place beneath the surface.

This season of change in the life of a church requires wisdom and Spirit-given insight. It is a strategic time to assess the health and direction of a congregation. The necessary work must go beyond the efforts of the staff. A more robust, shared effort from the congregation at large is essential. In short, everything needed for a new era of growth and faithful ministry is also needed for a healthy navigation of pastoral transition. How the congregation is led through this one major transition may affect how they cope with every other challenge thrust upon them down the road.



We hope that we have made a clear case for hiring a well-trained [Transitional Pastor](#). If you decide to go that much-preferred route, then the following matters are important to consider:

### COMPENSATION FOR A TRANSITIONAL PASTOR

- Finances are usually tight for churches in transition. The temptation is to try to conserve resources either by underpaying the Transitional Pastor or by making the position less than full-time. However, a Transitional Pastor is a skilled professional with a specific specialty. A good general rule for Transitional Pastor compensation is to match the salary and benefits package of the departed pastor.

### QUESTIONS TO ASK

- Did your previous pastor run the day-to-day operations of the church in a conventional way so that any pastor could step in?
- Does the congregation know and understand its true feelings about the previous pastor?
- What problems did the previous pastor leave behind?

In light of these questions, what are you looking for in a Transitional Pastor? We recommend hiring someone with spiritual and emotional maturity who is skilled in:

- Theological understanding
- Social psychology and group dynamics
- Leading organizations to identify their mission
- Adaptive leadership
- Helping people who experience loss
- Dealing with conflict and/or peacemaking and christian conciliation



ECO has Certified Transitional Pastors (CTPs) who are specially trained to help churches during periods of transition. You can find more information on these individuals and the process of hiring them at [ecotransitionalpastors.org](http://ecotransitionalpastors.org).

# STEP 5

## INSTALL TRANSITIONAL LEADERSHIP

The beginning of a Transitional Pastor's ministry is extremely important. And yet that beginning often comes at a time when a leadership malaise has descended over the church. Many congregations that would ordinarily be great at receiving visitors and new members find themselves frozen by the prospect of welcoming a Transitional Pastor.

The first few weeks of a transitional ministry are the best time to lay out what people can expect. Who is responsible for explaining the plan to the congregation? The Transitional Pastor may understand the process of transitional leadership and may have led several congregations through similar transitions. Much more specific knowledge needs to be communicated at this time beyond simply knowing what usually happens. Lay congregational leaders will head off trouble by planning a strong onboarding for the Transitional Pastor.

One of the most difficult concepts to communicate at the beginning of a transition is what the congregation should expect regarding new ministry initiatives or structural reorganization. If covenant partners assume too static a picture for what will be happening in the transition, they may become restless or disengaged. If they anticipate massive changes from the core values of the past, they may grow anxious or start pressuring leaders for their vision of the way things should be. A balance of innovation and continuity must be found in order to embrace the best of the past and create an exciting vision for the future.

In the first few weeks, a clear message needs to be repeated multiple times in multiple settings. The congregation needs to hear on several occasions what can be expected in the coming months. Set aside time during a service, or have a special worship service, to commission your Transitional Pastor. Be sure to include a significant introduction, an explanation of the commitment, pastoral vows, Covenant Partner vows, and specific prayers for the Transitional Pastor and his or her ministry.

# STEP 6

## ASSESS THE CURRENT AND FUTURE MISSION OF THE CONGREGATION

The creation of a Church Profile is intended to produce a document that summarizes the church's unique character, its program, and its mission direction.

It is a systematic review of the church's life. It evaluates the needs of the congregation and the wider community outside of the church. Then it suggests a direction for engaging in mission based on the identified needs. In a time of transition, a Church Profile results in a thorough description of present ministry and future vision as a way to raise people's perspective toward a shared picture of what "good pastoral leadership" looks like.

The loss of a pastor presents an opportunity to reflect on the effectiveness of the congregation in sharing the fullness of life in Christ with its community. The conversations, prayerful discernment, and listening that is required to construct a Church Profile may liberate the congregation from the tyranny of the way things have always been and provide the opportunity to experience a different approach to leadership.

The session will want to create a team to conduct this study and bring the findings to the congregation. Will the Church Profile Team also be the Pastor Nominating Committee or will a Church Profile Team complete its study and hand the results over to a separate Pastor Nominating Committee?

Many people might expect that the same team that carried out the Church Profile would also carry out the search. That has often been done, and perhaps successfully. But we recommend that these two tasks be done by two separate teams with one or two overlapping members. Here are three reasons why:

1

First, both the task of assessing the church's mission and the task of finding, interviewing, and selecting a pastor are long and intense. If a team is deployed to first study the mission and then find a pastor, they may be exhausted by the time they come to the final interviews, which is the most important time during these tasks.

# 2

Second, the potential for dysfunctional personal interactions to grow and become debilitating often increases as people work together over long periods of time and on such crucial tasks. After a careful effort to put together a balanced team, a congregation might end up having to replace some exhausted or nonproductive members right when they are at a crucial juncture in their search.

# 3

Third, the process of developing criteria for what is most important in a new pastor may galvanize a sense of the ideal person the team is looking for. This could be trouble when in the process of interviewing actual candidates. It is better all around to have one team write the mission study and develop criteria, and another team implement those criteria in a search.

ECO has two helpful resources that can guide you through this task: MissionInsite and the Vision Framing Process.



MissionInsite pulls together demographic information for community research and ministry development. On ECO's [MissionInsite webpage](#), you can watch a [short video](#) explaining MissionInsite and how it can help set the stage for your pastoral transition and search. Every ECO church has access to a free account. On the webpage there is a link to activate your church's free account. We have a designated staff member available to assist you with creating your MissionInsite study. For assistance with church registration or how to use the MissionInsite tool, email [info@flourishmovement.org](mailto:info@flourishmovement.org).



The [Vision Framing Process](#) is a helpful tool for a session, key staff, and other church leaders to dream and discern God's preferred future for your congregation. It will help you clarify your mission and vision. In turn, this will help the Pastor Nominating Committee in its search for the next called pastor, who will lead and implement this vision. For more information or assistance with the Vision Framing Process, email [info@flourishmovement.org](mailto:info@flourishmovement.org).

# STEP 7 | FORMATION OF THE PASTOR NOMINATING COMMITTEE (PNC).

The rest of this document will address the formation and function of the PNC.

## FORMATION OF THE PASTOR NOMINATING COMMITTEE (PNC)

The PNC is formed of Covenant Partners from your congregation. The congregation's governing documents (bylaws, policies, and practices), the presbytery's MPT Manual, and the ECO Polity help to guide this process. The session should be as clear as possible on the specifics needed for the job description and the personality traits that the new pastor may need to best fulfill the job description. If the session or the elected PNC need more assistance, ECO is ready to support the search process using our Pastoral Search Assistance tool as described later in this section. Unless it's stated differently in your policies or in the presbytery, the congregation may approve any Covenant Partners, deacons, and elders to serve on the PNC.

Practically speaking, the session and/or the nominating committee should choose a slate of candidates to be voted on at a congregational meeting. It is highly recommended that the chairperson of the PNC be a member of the session. The recommended size of the PNC varies depending on the size of your church, with five to nine members being the norm. The best candidates for this important committee are those who are well-versed in the mission and vision of your church. It is important that these individuals are connected, competent, and spiritually mature. The process that they will embark on is one that requires a high level of both commitment and discretion.

Once the candidates have been chosen and asked if they are willing to receive the nomination, a congregational meeting should be called. The session or church nominating committee, depending on the congregation's rule, should bring forth the recommended slate of PNC members for that meeting but should also allow for nominations from the floor. It is important to note here that the PNC is not a committee of the session but instead a committee of the entire congregation.

The document [Questions for Potential PNC Members](#) can be used for possible PNC members to help them discern, consider, and pray about joining the committee.

For a summary of the different roles for the PNC, please see: [Roles and Responsibilities of the Pastor Nominating Committee \(PNC\)](#).



## ROLE OF THE SESSION

Take this opportunity to claim your roles as the spiritual shepherds of your church. Govern and guide your congregation in its mission for Christ in the world. Care for your flock. Shepherd them. Point them to Jesus, and live your lives as an example for them.

As mentioned above, your congregation will need you to decide how to handle the transition as it works with the session and the elected PNC. Practically speaking, the session and MPT will need to answer the following questions:

- Will you hire a Transitional Pastor?
- Who will be the Head of Staff?
- Who will preach?
- Who will moderate session and committee meetings?
- Will you hire an outside consultant to help with your search?
- Will you use ECO's Pastoral Search Assistant program?
- How will you effectively communicate to the congregation during the transition? What is the budget for the search process?
- What is the salary range that you will offer? Here is a helpful link that might help you determine an appropriate salary: [ChurchSalary\\_|Church Law & Tax](#)
- Is your church going to offer the pastor housing?



Once these questions are answered, you can begin the important task of creating a candidate job description.

Much of this description will be based on the work done by the Mission Study Team. Here is an example of a [church profile](#), or go to the [ECO Job Board](#) for ideas on how to create these documents. If you need an additional guide, [As You Prepare Your Congregational Profile](#) helps outline what information to prepare for a church profile. The MPT will approve your Church Profile and the Pastor Job Description so that they can make sure that the session passes on a cohesive vision to the PNC before they begin their search.





# PASTOR NOMINATING COMMITTEE PROCESS

The section outlines the role of the Pastor Nominating Committee (PNC) and provides ways to find and onboard your new pastor.

PNC

## STEP 1 | FIRST MEETING OF THE PASTOR NOMINATING COMMITTEE (PNC)

The chairperson should call the first meeting of the committee and offer up a basic agenda. Time should be spent praying together and learning about one another. ECO's [Pastoral Search Assistance](#) resource provides time to accomplish this important aspect of building a solid team through our leadership characteristics and attributes assessment called ProScan.

In your first meeting, your PNC will want to answer the following questions:

As your PNC forms, please contact your Presbytery MPT or the liaison they have provided to keep the presbytery informed of your progress. The MPT will need to approve your church profile before you post it on [ECO's Job board](#).

Finally, it is essential that your committee studies and becomes experts on your Church Profile. If you have a Mission Study Team, you will want to meet with them and hear everything that they learned through their process. If you do not have a Mission Study Team, then proceed to Step 2 and meet with your session.

1. When and how often will you meet?
2. What role will each committee member have (chair, secretary, communications, at-large, etc.)?
3. Will you use ECO's [Pastoral Search Assistance](#) tool?
4. How often will you communicate your progress to the session and congregation?
5. What is your timeline? Settle on a goal for when you would like to call your next pastor. Each church's situation is different, so this will depend on whether or not you have a Transitional Pastor and whether or not you are embarking on a succession plan.
  - a. Once you settle on your timeline, communicate this to the congregation both verbally and on your website. Make sure to mention that this is simply a goal, not necessarily exact dates.
  - b. You can use the [Sample PNC Timeline](#) as a reference or you can adopt it as your own.
6. Who will be in charge of making sure the church website is up to date? You will want to put a "Pastor Search" button on your website that includes your deadline.
7. Include a newly created email address for the PNC. Remember, communication is key throughout this entire process.

# STEP 2 | PASTORAL SEARCH PROCESS

In this second step, your search process begins. The PNC will need to meet with the session and receive the Pastor Job Description. [Here is a link to an example](#), or go to the [ECO Job Board](#) for ideas on how to create a Pastor Job Description that suits the needs of your church.



It is not enough to simply receive the document from the elders. Spend time with them and ask them what their desires and expectations are for the next pastor. This will help you get a more robust understanding for your search, and it will help the session grasp the variety of hopes and expectations for the qualifications and characteristics of the incoming pastor.

It is also recommend that you do likewise with the staff. Oftentimes the staff is not involved in the hiring process, it is vital that they feel valued and heard throughout the pastoral search process. This will ultimately help with the transition when the new pastor arrives. Listen to the staff and aim to discover what their expectations and desires are. You can do this at the same meeting with the session if that is feasible.

Finally, post the job description and your Church Profile on a multitude of websites after receiving approval from your presbytery MPT. A great place to start is on [ECO's Job Board, found here](#).



We have also found success posting jobs on:



- [Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary](#)
- [EPC's Ministry Opportunities page](#)
- [Church Staffing](#)
- [Fuller Theological Seminary's Job Board](#)

Do not forget to add the job posting to your own webpage and share it on social media as well. Be sure to include clear instructions for how people should apply and a deadline for applications. We recommend requesting a resume, cover letter, at least three recorded sermons, and at least three references. Have them submit these materials via the email address specifically created for the PNC.

Before you move to Step 3, take some time to talk about the following topics that are integral to the PNC's success: trust, confidentiality, and communication:

- **How will you cultivate trust among committee members?**
- **How will you maintain the trust of the congregation throughout your entire search?**
- **Will each PNC member commit to confidentiality for the benefit of the process and the candidates who are applying?**
- **How will you handle conflict among committee members during the search?**

Finally, you will need to create communication plans for both the candidates and the congregation. Your committee alone should know the names of the candidates. But when will you communicate milestones to the session? What about the congregation and staff? What types of things will you communicate?

As you think through the answers to these questions, let us offer up a suggestion. If the PNC knows 100% of the information, then the session should know 80% (perhaps everything except the names of the candidates), the staff should know 70% (which may or may not include when a candidate may be interviewing at the church), and the congregation should know 60% (where the PNC is in the process, but not necessarily when a candidate may be visiting the church). These levels of communication will help build and maintain trust, transparency, and confidentiality.

## PASTORAL SEARCH ASSISTANCE



The ECO Synod has created a [Pastoral Search Assistance](#) resource that can help your session and any subsequent search committee best locate your next pastor. If your church decides to use this search assistance tool, the assigned navigator will use assessments and surveys to share additional information to better align the job description and the leadership attributes best suited for the next pastor (as the PNC works through the phases of the search process). We realize that some churches will hire an outside consultant, but we recognize that many churches cannot afford this service. Pastoral Search Assistance is a cost-effective tool that will enhance your search process. To find more information on this resource, [click here](#).



If cost is an issue for your church, we recommend contacting your presbytery in order to ask for financial assistance. Most of our presbyteries know how vital this tool is for the success of our local churches and are more than willing to subsidize the costs. In some cases ECO can also establish payments and installments based on levels of need.

Whether or not you choose to utilize the Synod's tool, this guide will be helpful for your session and PNC. If you are unable to engage with the Synod through ECO's Pastoral Search Assistance process or you want some more guidance, please contact your presbytery's MPT.

# STEP 3

## PNC ASSESSES CANDIDATES

The fun begins! We hope you will find suitable candidates by using the search tools above. Many of your candidates will find you and come forward on their own as they are seeking God's next call to ministry.

Although unusual, someone from within the congregation or staff might even apply. (See \* below for guidance on handling these sometimes delicate situations.) You will also want to search for candidates who might not be actively looking for a new call. This is best done through networking with presbytery and synod leaders.

As you assess the applicants, make sure they have submitted everything you have requested. If they have, let them know when they can expect to hear from you. If anything is missing, let them know right away what else they need to submit.

Much of this stage will be spent listening to sermons. In order to save you time, we recommend that you immediately decide which candidates do not meet your most basic criteria. Let those candidates know promptly, and then you can begin listening to the sermons of those people who remain possibilities.

Podcasts and audio-only sermons are sufficient, but video sermons are preferred. Watching video recordings of sermons helps you stay more engaged and gives you a much better feel for the candidate's communication style. We recommend that every member of the PNC listens to at least one of the same sermons of every candidate.



[Here is a helpful tool for evaluating sermons.](#)

We suggest you also check the social media presence of your candidates (Facebook, Instagram, etc.). What you learn about the candidates can be very helpful in your discernment process.

Once you have evaluated their sermons based on style, theological depth/accuracy, and practical application, you will want each member of the PNC to rate the candidates on the following criteria (on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being poor and 5 being excellent): qualifications, experience, gifts appropriate for your ministry context, and likeability. Your PNC will probably need to develop additional, more detailed criteria as well. Such criteria may have emerged from your prior conversations with elders and staff.

## SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

### INTERNAL CANDIDATES

Internal candidates: What should you do if you have an internal candidate? First of all, ECO's polity allows for a church to hire pastoral positions from within. While this might not always be the best option, we do not want to stifle the possibility that the Holy Spirit is beckoning your church to call one of your current staff members to this new role. Second, we have included a document [here](#) that will give you the best practices when considering an internal candidate.



### OTHER TYPES OF CANDIDATES:

If you are interested in hiring a full-time or part-time Commissioned Lay Pastor (CLP), ordination candidate, or someone just out of seminary as a Head of Staff, please contact [ordination@eco-pres.org](mailto:ordination@eco-pres.org) for more information. ECO may have some options for your church to consider, especially if you are a smaller church and are open to an option like this for your next pastor. ECO also offers coaching support and a [First Call Cohort](#) in support of those taking on a first time Head of Staff role in our ECO churches.



# STEP 4 | NARROWING DOWN THE OPTIONS

During this step you will compare your thoughts and notes. The types of things to consider at this time may include: Which candidates have the best average rating? Are there any candidates that a PNC member is strongly against?

We ask this question now because a PNC member may have valid reasons to dismiss a candidate that were overlooked by other members of the PNC. On the other hand, we do not suggest that you mention candidates that are your favorites at this time. There is still so much to discern, and committee members should not feel pressure towards certain candidates before more information is gathered.

Depending on the number of candidates remaining, you will want to choose your top 25%. That means if you had 24 candidates initially apply, then you will keep the top six candidates. However, if you have fewer candidates, you may want to consider keeping the top three regardless of the percentage. Those candidates with whom you do not want to continue the process should be emailed immediately, thanking them for their interest and letting them know that you will not be considering them for the position “at this time.” We believe that this phrase is important because in some instances (albeit rarely) you might want to circle back to a candidate later down the line.

For the remaining candidates, contact them to schedule phone interviews and/or ask them follow-up questions via email. If you schedule phone interviews, we highly recommend that all members of the PNC participate whenever possible. [Here is a link](#) to suggestions for these initial interviews.



Additionally, at this point it is helpful and appropriate to disclose the salary range ([click here to see a sample terms of call](#)). Be sure to check with your presbytery to make sure that you are meeting the minimum terms-of-call requirements.



Ask remaining candidates if they wish to continue based on what they know about your church and about their own situations. Now would be a good time to update your session, staff, and congregation on where the PNC is the pastoral search process.

# STEP 5 | VIRTUAL INTERVIEWS

As you get to know your candidates better, the discernment process can get more and more difficult. As you begin Step 5, you may continue considering as many of the remaining candidates as you would like, however, don't be afraid to whittle down your list even more.

This step will include a virtual interview of each of the remaining candidates with the entire PNC. A candidate might have answered one of your initial questions in a way that you know will not work at your church. A candidate might have had some glaring shortcomings during the phone interview. If that is the case, then immediately thank them for their interest and let them know that you will not be considering them for the position "at this time." Again, we believe that this phrase is important because in some instances (albeit very rarely) you might want to circle back to a candidate later down the line.



If you are using [ECO's Pastoral Search Assistance](#) resource, each candidate who makes it to this stage of the process will receive personalized interview questions based on his or her own personality and leadership attributes as these interview questions are matched to the Job Model the PNC creates. Or, you can see the [ECO Clergy Interview Guide](#). However, no matter what path you've decided for this process, we also want you to ask questions based on your church's profile and what you have discerned about your candidates thus far. Allow ample time for the candidates to ask questions of the PNC as well.



After these interviews are completed, proceed with only the candidates who you are confident would be a good fit for your church. Ask permission to call their references. We recommend that you perform background checks at this time as well. When calling their references, make sure you have a list of questions prepared beforehand. Have at least two members of the PNC on each of these calls.

Now would be a good time to update your session, staff, and congregation on where the PNC is in the pastoral search process.

# STEP 6

## IN-PERSON INTERVIEWS

You are doing great! Keep praying! Now is the time to schedule in-person interviews. We recommend you interview no more than three candidates. This will save your church money and time. This step is reserved for those candidates who each member of your PNC could actually foresee nominating.

Inform your three top candidates that they are finalists. Also contact the others, thank them for their time, and pray for them. (Don't forget that key phrase: "at this time.")

Finally, at this point you will want to reach out to your MPT and have them interview your finalists to ensure that, if you nominate them, they will be approved by your presbytery. Listen and trust your MPT at this step. If they strongly encourage you not to continue with someone, then we highly recommend that you listen to their guidance.

As you prepare for the in-person interviews, we advise the following:

Invite the candidate's spouse (if married) and children (if applicable). Make sure that you let them know you will pay for their lodging and travel expenses. If your resources are limited, then make sure to provide housing in a comfortable situation for the candidate (and family). Will you include the spouse in any of the interviews? ECO recommends including the spouse in at least one interview and a meal with the PNC. During the other times, when the spouse is not included, you should consider whether you want to make plans for the spouse or simply give them free time to explore the area on their own. It may also be helpful to also ask the candidate and their spouse what they would prefer.

For example, you could require both to be in one interview, but then give alternate options for the pastor's spouse that includes being part of additional interviews. Also, if children are coming, how will you care for them? Please work ahead of time with the candidate and the spouse to address these questions.

Make a detailed schedule for the candidate that includes:

- Meals
- Interviews
- Informal gatherings
- Worship times
- Touring the facilities
- Touring the community and housing market
- Intentional "down-time" for candidate (and family) to rest (and reconnect).



[Here is a sample schedule that you might consider using for a candidating weekend.](#)



You should plan on introducing your finalists to the session and staff. Doing so is primarily for the benefit of the finalists. Meeting these key leaders will greatly enhance their ability to discern a call with your church. Remind staff and session members that they are not making the decision.

You should have already watched or listened to several sermons by each candidate. If you feel it necessary to see them preach in person as well, you are certainly allowed to do so. The best option is to visit the candidates in their current churches with their prior approval. We do not recommend having the candidate preach to just the PNC. You will not get an accurate feel for their ability to communicate to a congregation. Trust that the sermons you have listened to or watched, the interviews, and the references have given you ample information to make a wise decision. Trust God and trust your process.

## UPDATE YOUR SESSION, STAFF, AND CONGREGATION.

Now would be a good time to update your session, staff, and congregation on where the PNC is in the pastoral search process. We have created a visual timeline/checklist that your session can use for its own internal purposes or you can use it as a way to update your session, staff or congregation. View the timeline/checklist [here](#).



# STEP 7 | MAKING THE CHOICE

It is time to choose your top candidate. A unanimous vote would be a reason to celebrate, but it is not essential. A simple majority is all that is required, but admittedly, it is not ideal. Strive for unity of mind and spirit.

Take the time necessary to pray and discuss. It may be helpful to decide on how many “yes” votes are needed before you ever meet with a candidate. For instance you may decide that 75% of your team must be in favor of a candidate. This number does not need to be recorded or provided to anyone outside the PNC. Each PNC member needs to agree to be of one mind once the candidate is selected, even if the member did not vote in favor of the candidate.

Once a decision has been made, offer the position to your top candidate. Be sure to tell that candidate the reasons why you would like him or her to be your pastor. Encourage and pray with them. Then present the details of the call and give the candidate a timeframe in which you expect their answer.

At this point it is vitally important that you allow the candidate time to discern his or her call. Up to this point, the candidate has been through an arduous process and deserves the opportunity to pray, research, and deeply consider the position. It is also appropriate for the candidate to negotiate the terms of call during this time. The PNC might be given the authority to do this on behalf of the church, but it might be better to create a task force from session that will handle the negotiations. Whatever you do, please do not make promises to the candidate that you don't explicitly know that the church can keep.

If/when you reach an agreement and the candidate accepts, stop what you are doing and praise God for his faithfulness! Pray with and for your nominee.

At this point it would be appropriate to let any remaining candidates know that you have offered the position to someone else and they have accepted. Thank them profusely, and even consider sending them a hand-written note of appreciation.

If the candidate does not accept the call, then you will need to decide if you want to circle back to your other finalists or launch another search.

PNC

## STEP 8 | INTRODUCTIONS

Create a document/letter to the congregation explaining the entire process and highlight those attributes that have drawn you to your nominee. [Here is a sample](#) document that gives you an idea of how you might go about doing this.



If you have not done so yet, introduce your nominee to the staff and elders. Set up a shared meal for the nominee and her or his family to get acquainted with the key leaders of your church. This can be done on the Saturday before Candidate Sunday (see next step).

PNC

## STEP 9 | CONGREGATIONAL MEETING

Now is the time to call your congregational meeting. The purpose of this meeting is to vote on the call of your next pastor. [Here is a sample agenda](#) for the congregational meeting.



Traditionally, the Sunday of the congregational meeting is called, "Candidate Sunday", and the pastoral candidate usually preaches during the service(s) on that day (although this is not a requirement). You might want to have a luncheon or event after the vote in order to welcome your new pastor (and family).

# STEP 10 | CELEBRATE!

Your search is now complete, and the moderator of the congregational meeting should have entertained a motion to dissolve the PNC. We hope that you feel celebrated and appreciated for your service to Jesus and his Bride, the church. Take a break and think about how faithful the Lord has been to you and your congregation.

However, we have to tell you that your job is not quite finished. Your new pastor may initially rely on your support. Help him or her meet church members and learn the lay of the land. But also let your pastor spread his or her wings and fly! It is only natural that your new pastor will begin working closely with the session, staff, and other members of the congregation. Cheer your new pastor on and pray, pray, pray!

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE SESSION

### 1 SAYING GOODBYE TO THE TRANSITIONAL PASTOR

Both the congregation and the Transitional Pastor should devote time to saying goodbye well. This might include a celebration of the ministry of the Transitional Pastor on the last Sunday of service. Consider finding a way of thanking the Transitional Pastor's family, too. Transitional Ministry almost always entails some form of sacrifice on the part of the Transitional Pastor's family. Bonds have been developed that can never be broken. However, in order for the church to thrive, the Transitional Pastor must leave (and no longer be involved) in order to allow plenty of room for the new pastor to be fully embraced by the congregation.

## 2 INSTALLATION AND ONBOARDING

The responsibility for the pastor's installation falls to the session and presbytery. Together with the new pastor, they will create a plan for the installation service. This is a time for celebration, but it is also an opportunity for the pastor and the congregation to receive exhortations regarding this new relationship.

An often-overlooked step when bringing on a solo or senior pastor is helping them to start their position well. Therefore, churches have the option to add coaching during the onboarding process of the new pastor in order to maximize the chances of a successful start to the ministry relationship. [Click here](#) to learn more about Onboard Coaching for Pastors. Reach out to ECO at [info@flourishmovement.org](mailto:info@flourishmovement.org) to learn how your pastor may receive a year of coach for free if they are entering their first call and serving as Head of Staff. If you have additional questions, you can email ECO's Ministry Resource Coordinator at [kim@eco-pres.org](mailto:kim@eco-pres.org).

When onboarding First Call Pastors, ECO works with John and Laura Crosby, who lead and mentor a cohort of young ECO leaders in their first call. To learn more, visit the [First Call Pastor Cohort](#) page on our website. On this page there is also a webinar on what they're up to in the cohort, what key challenges young leaders are facing, and ways we can support them more comprehensively going forward.

## CONCLUSION

This is the conclusion of the Pastoral Search and Transition Guide and we hope that it has helped you navigate his pastoral transition and search well. We encourage you to continue participating in your local presbytery gatherings with your new pastor for fellowship, training and equipping as well as to consider serving in your presbytery and help other congregations by sharing what you learned through your journey. This can often happen in your congregation's [Mission Affinity Group \(MAG\)](#). If you are not currently in a MAG, [contact your Presbytery MPT](#) for more information. The MPT can also help your pastor(s) join a [Pastor Covenant Group \(PCG\)](#) if they are not currently in one. If the ECO Synod can be of any further assistance, please contact us at [office@eco-pres.org](mailto:office@eco-pres.org) otherwise we hope to see you at the next ECO National Gathering.



## WHERE TO GO FROM HERE

For more information about ECO's Pastoral Search and Transition process, watch this [informational webinar](#) and/or reach out to your ECO MPT ([contact here](#)) about how they can help support the leadership transition process within your church. For any questions regarding ECO's [Pastoral Search Assistance](#), [Succession Planning](#), or any other resources, contact [info@flourishmovement.org](mailto:info@flourishmovement.org). In order to help you see all the resources and options ECO has to offer regarding Pastoral Search Assistance, please see the document called, "[ECO Pastoral Search Assistance: Levels of Engagement](#)". This document contains resources in different tiered levels ranging from free resources to fee based options.



## GLOSSARY

We have also created a glossary of all the resources and links that have been mentioned in this guide. We hope that this will provide you with quick and easy access to anything mentioned in this guide that you might want more information about. [View glossary here](#).

Note: When opening some of the links connected to this resource, you might be redirected to the Flourish website or other websites connected to ECO. All of these websites support the success of your upcoming pastor search and transition. The Flourish website exists as the educational and equipping arm for the denomination as well as a place for others who want to partner with us when it comes to assistance with training and consulting, courses, and other support services for individuals and churches seeking deeper growth and development outside the denomination. If you have any questions about any of ECO's Flourishing resources or the Flourish Network, email [info@flourishmovement.org](mailto:info@flourishmovement.org) or visit the flourish website at: [flourishmovement.org](http://flourishmovement.org).