

Searching for the Called

*A Guide for Congregations
in Ministerial Transitions*



Search process overview
for interim ministers

Laura Stephens-Reed

Dear interim minister:

Thank you for your faithfulness in what can sometimes feel like an underappreciated ministry: encouraging and gently challenging a congregation during its transition from one settled pastoral leader to another. I see your efforts, and I know that you are helping the church live into the fullness of its mission.

When it is time for the church to begin its active search for the next minister, your role shifts. The congregational self-study pieces are complete, the information to include in profiles has been compiled, and it is time to move from being the hands-on coach of the transition team to an as-needed resource for the search team. So how do you make sure that the passing of the baton goes smoothly and the search builds on the hard work that you, the transition team, and the church have done together?

Enter *Searching for the Called*, an approach to ministerial searches that honors the interim process and harnesses the opportunities of the interim period. In the following pages you will find the summary of a search process that utilizes the same intentionality and deep reflection you have been urging during the congregation's movement through the focus points. (If you are still knee-deep in the focus points, you might also note a few tools helpful for that work in the full resource.)

The complete *Searching for the Called* materials can be downloaded at <https://www.searchingforthecalled.org/>, printed, and used at no charge. At the end of this summary, you will see that coaching and training options are also available. As a coach and the developer of this resource, I would be happy to provide hands-on guidance to your church's search team.

Please do not hesitate to [contact me](#) if you have questions or feedback. My goal is to be the best possible partner with congregations and leaders during their seasons of transition.

Grace and peace,

Laura Stephens-Reed

The story behind Searching for the Called

I love the local church.

I believe the world *needs* the local church to share and embody the good news of Christ's love for all people.

But in sixteen years of ordained ministry, I have too often seen congregations diverted from their essential purpose by low-level anxiety, if not outright conflict. Two primary sources of these distractions – minister-ministry setting mismatches and rocky starts in new pastorates – have roots in the search and call process.

As a candidate for settled ministry positions, an intentional interim minister, a coach, and a colleague to pastors all along the ecumenical spectrum, I have observed that search teams are generally comprised of enthusiastic, committed, and capable people. Search teams are often under-resourced to design and implement a process that is tailored to the peculiarities of calling a clergyperson, however, and many do not know where to turn for help.

Three years ago I began to consider whether I had a perspective on the search process worth offering to my beloved Church. I applied for a [Pastoral Study Project grant](#) through the [Louisville Institute](#), and I consider myself very fortunate to have received generous financial support for researching, writing, and sharing the approach to ministerial searches that I now offer to you. This project has been a labor of love, and I have felt energized and inspired through each stage of it. I hope and trust this means I have been as faithful as humanly possible to the task.

Why use Searching for the Called?

This approach to ministerial searches:

- Grounds the entirety of the process in God, making it an opportunity for spiritual growth.
- Emphasizes the biblical mandate of hospitality – toward fellow search team members, congregational and community voices, the stories and concerns of candidates, and the movements of the Holy Spirit.
- Bursts assumptions about the congregation and its pastoral needs so that the church can accurately name criteria for a great-fit minister.
- Builds trust within the search team, between the team and the congregation, and between the team and candidates so that anxiety levels decrease.
- Prompts frequent and clear communication with congregation and candidates to avoid frustration on all sides.
- Pays close attention to the importance of language and the ways it shapes the work of the search.
- Utilizes coaching questions to help search team members think deeply about their process.
- Offers original tools to support the search team's work.
- Shares the candidate perspective so that the search team can understand what is happening on the other end of the line.
- Provides an assessment for each stage of the search so that there is clarity about whether the team is ready to move on to the next phase.
- Includes a troubleshooting section and hacks for small churches.
- Helps the congregation welcome and resource the new minister for a fast start.

Who should consider using Searching for the Called?

If the congregation is wondering whether there is a great-fit pastor out there, Searching for the Called is for your church.

If the search team is concerned that it doesn't (or you as the interim minister are worried that the search team doesn't) have the process or resources to locate that great-fit pastor, Searching for the Called is for your church.

If the congregation is eager to tune in more deeply to the Holy Spirit's movements in the search process, Searching for the Called is for your church.

If the search team is hoping to make the process as hospitable as possible toward all the parties involved, Searching for the Called is for your church.

Note that Searching for the Called aims to be easily customizable, because no congregation is exactly like another. If the church belongs to a denomination that recommends a particular search process, this approach is not meant to replace it but to come alongside it. If, however, the church is starting its search from scratch, this approach should offer ample structure to guide the work. The materials are written with solo/senior pastor searches in mind, but they can be tweaked for any ministerial search.

Overview of each Searching for the Called stage

Below is a summary of what happens in each search stage and how that work connects to the overall arc of the search. The pre-search stages will be covered just before your arrival and in your work with the transition team, and they are included here simply for your information. The search team development stages and beyond will be most applicable for the hand-off to the search team and for the search itself.

Pre-search

Waiting on readiness: identifying the right time to start a search

In this phase the church has the chance to remember who it is apart from the identity of the former minister, thus loosening the grips of anxiety and reactivity on the search process. The to-be-named search team will then be better prepared to invite appropriate candidates to consider journeying with the congregation, and the called minister will be able to connect more quickly and deeply with members and mission upon arrival.

Befriending the past and anticipating the future: answering key questions about identity and direction

Before the search can begin, your church must celebrate its past and contemplate its future, listening deeply for God-given direction. In this phase congregation-wide work rekindles hope and fosters deeper connections among weary and wary members. These conversations also provide the basis for describing the minister best suited to accompany your church on the next part of its journey.

Developing the search team

Gathering the open-hearted: selecting search team members

In this phase your congregation commissions a few representatives to bring the whole of the church – its stories, values, hopes, and challenges – into search conversations and considerations. When the right people are in the room, the congregation trusts that the search is being conducted faithfully, the search team

members collaborate well, and the candidates are fully welcomed by and informed about the church.

Growing in trust: becoming a search team

In perhaps the most overlooked – yet crucial – phase of the search process, team members deepen their relationships with one another. As a result team members feel comfortable offering and strengthening divergent proposals, know how to help one another bring their best to the work at hand, and come to authentic agreement on essential actions. When the process is complete, the team and the congregation will be able to trust that every effort was made and every idea was put on the table for full consideration.

Creating space for the Spirit to move: grounding the search process in God

For a search team to be led by God in its work, the search process must create space for the Spirit to be heard. In this phase the team crafts a structure for its worshipful work, building in intentional times and means of listening for God's guidance. The search process then becomes not just functional but also formational for team members, whose new spiritual disciplines and sensitivities spill over into the whole congregation.

Designing process and core documents

Preparing for blessing: discovering and setting the process for calling a minister

In this phase the search team ensures it has the information it needs to conduct the search, then details how it will carry out its work. Intentionality around process undergirds the growing trust among search team members and between the search team and church as a whole, thus decreasing the anxiety that can lead to fatigue and quick decisions.

Crafting the welcome: collating information and creating key documents

Before the search team can invite potential candidates into a process of mutual discernment, it must first compose key documents by which ministers learn about

the position. These documents are created for generating initial interest as well as for the search team's later use, since well-written documents lay the groundwork for establishing trust with candidates, provide tools for assessing fit, and streamline clarification and negotiation at the end of the process.

Extending the welcome: inviting potential candidates to consider your open position

For potential candidates to consider the joy of being your minister, they must know about your open position. In this phase the search team begins to share widely the congregation's story and invite candidates to imagine themselves within it. When this is done thoroughly and authentically, candidates will be eager to explore how their journeys might intersect with the church's.

Engaging with candidates

Imagining new possibilities: discerning whom to interview

With ministerial profiles and/or resumes in hand, the time has come for the search team members to name which candidates they would like to invite into conversation. Drawing upon the already-established process for moving forward, the search team sets up interviews with and offers more information to continuing candidates, thus fostering relationship and mutual investment.

Opening to one another: conducting initial interviews

In this phase the process moves from reading papers to live interaction. The search team delves deeper into the gifts and passions of candidates, allowing these ministers to show where they meet and challenge the team's criteria and assumptions. The candidates explore the position and the context with their questions and their observations of the search team's dynamics. The search team and candidates then decide whether to pursue further conversation with one another or to part ways graciously.

Deepening the dialogue: interviewing in person with candidates

In this phase the search team considers what it would look like for each of the remaining candidates to be the church's minister. At the same time, the candidates are imagining what it would be like to work and live in your congregation and community. By the end of this phase, the search team will be ready to recommend the candidate whose abilities align most closely with the church's leadership needs for its God-given direction.

Sharing the excitement: presenting the candidate of choice

Having gathered information from a variety of sources and listened for God's guidance through it, the search team is ready to present its candidate of choice to the body (e.g., governing board of the church, congregation as a whole, judicatory) that extends the call. When the search team sets up the candidate of choice to make the best possible first impression, the church is eager to welcome the candidate, paving the way for a fast start in the new position.

Covenanting with the new minister

Co-creating the partnership: extending the call

In extending a call to be the minister, the congregation makes an offer not just of relationship but of true partnership. In this phase, the details of the covenant are finalized in ways that free the minister and the congregation to live toward the vision for the church. Done well, the congregation and minister emerge from this discussion feeling energized and cared for.

Embracing the new: resourcing the minister for a good start

The search process does not end with the extension of a call and finalization of a covenant, because the work of helping the new minister transition in is just beginning. In this phase the search team ensures that church members claim responsibility for providing the incoming minister (and family, if applicable) with essential information and assistance. This attention to detail allows the minister to focus more quickly and fully on pastoral tasks and paves the way for a smooth start.

Headings under each stage

Here's what you can expect from Searching for the Called in each phase of the search.

- *Overview of this search phase:* An encapsulation of what happens during this part of the search.
- *Essential tasks and why they matter:* What the search team must do to progress to the next stage and why.
- *Key reflection questions:* Open-ended queries to help get all ideas on the table for thorough discussion.
- *Best practices:* What carrying out this stage of the search well looks like.
- *Tools:* Ready-to-use helps for accomplishing the essential tasks.
- *From the candidate's perspective:* A peek inside what the potential pastor might be experiencing at this point in the search.
- *Are we ready for the next phase?* Yes/no questions to help the search team assess whether to move on to the next stage.
- *If you want to read more:* Resources for a deep dive into the tasks and dynamics at play in this phase.

List of tools included in Searching for the Called

- Questions for reflection throughout the search
- Questions to break open stuckness or tension
- Ways of examining and celebrating your congregation's past
- Congregational self-study discussion guide
- Dynamics of different church sizes
- Pastoral tasks and congregational needs across the church life cycle
- Search team composition checklist
- Search team leader tasks and desired qualities
- Building a high-functioning search team
- Exercises for building trust within the search team
- Assessments for helping search team members get to know each other
- Search team covenant checklist
- Definition of discernment
- Discernment outline
- Tools for discernment
- Criteria for discerning “is this God speaking?”
- Worshipful work meeting outline
- Things to consider when the associate pastor is interested in the open senior pastor position
- Candidate communications content
- Ways to bring the congregation along during the search
- Information to report to the congregation during the search
- Ways to broaden imagination about a “great fit” minister
- Information to include in a congregational profile/community snapshot
- Compensation considerations
- Possible ponds for finding candidates
- Technology options for interviews
- Interview planning worksheet
- Crafting a good interview question
- Sample interview questions
- Site visit considerations: going to the candidate
- Site visit considerations: candidate comes to neutral location
- Site visit considerations: candidate comes to church
- Doing due diligence with candidates
- Considerations regarding the presentation of multiple candidates to the congregation/leaders
- Minister-ministry setting covenant checklist
- Ideas for welcoming the new minister
- Information to give to the new minister

Does your church's search team need assistance with its process?

There is no charge to download, print, and use the [Searching for the Called](#) materials. If the search team needs additional guidance to apply Searching to the Called in your congregation, the following options are available.

30-minute phone consult

Go to <https://calendly.com/reverendlaura/search-process-consult> to schedule a free phone call to talk about how Searching for the Called can aid in the ministerial search.

Introductory webinar

This free, 1-hour webinar offered via the [Zoom](#) platform is open to all interested parties. The webinar will highlight challenges and opportunities during the search for a great-fit minister, show how Searching for the Called addresses both, and leave ample space for participants to ask questions. Webinar schedule and registration are available at <https://calendly.com/reverendlaura/searching-webinar>.

Search team coaching

Guidance throughout the search process will help the search team customize Searching for the Called and implement it in your congregation. It will also allow the team to make the transition from the focus points to the search seamlessly and to capitalize on opportunities, overcome obstacles, avoid shortcuts, and deal with overwhelm in the search for a great-fit minister. Hour-long calls will take place by phone or online platform at times convenient to the search team. The cost is \$2000.

Search team training

In-person training will resource the search team for its essential work and give the team members confidence in their ability to carry out the search well. Cost will vary depending on the length of training and travel expenses.

About the Searching for the Called creator

Rev. Laura Stephens-Reed believes in the power of the local church to change individuals and communities in the name of Christ. Her call is to increase churches' effectiveness by promoting well-being in congregations and in the people who lead them.

Laura has been credentialed as an Associate Certified Coach through the [International Coach Federation](#). She has also been trained as a Congregational Consultant and an Intentional Interim Minister by the [Center for Congregational Health](#). An ordained minister since 2002, Laura has served churches in a variety of settled and interim roles, including pastor, associate pastor, and minister with age-specific



groups. She is affiliated with the [Alliance of Baptists](#) and holds Ministerial Standing in the Alabama-Northwest Florida Region of the [Christian Church \(Disciples of Christ\)](#), and she is a member and contract employee of the [Cooperative Baptist Fellowship](#). In addition, Laura has been on staff and consulted with congregations in the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the United Methodist Church and has coached pastors in ten denominations. She earned her undergraduate degree from the [University of Tennessee](#) and her Master of Divinity from [Candler School of Theology](#) at Emory University.

Laura lives in Northport, Alabama, with her husband Matt, a United Methodist pastor, and their five-year-old son. She loves going to the playground and to music class, listening to audiobooks, watching tv and movies, and cheering on SEC football teams.

Contact information:

laura@searchingforthecalled.org

www.searchingforthecalled.org

256.763.0868