**THINKING ABOUT CALLING A CANDIDATE?**

*Guidelines for congregations considering calling a ministerial candidate*

**Introduction**

This document is meant to assist congregations in the CRCNA who are considering calling a candidate – a person who has completed seminary training and the necessary denominational requirements for entering ministry.

**When is a candidate eligible for a call?**

The synod of the CRCNA usually votes on candidates’ eligibility for ministry on the second or third Tuesday of June. Immediately upon the synodical vote, candidates are eligible for a call.

**When can congregations begin to have conversations with those who are applying for**

**candidacy?**

It is permissible for congregations and candidates to begin dialogue with one another before the synodical decision. There can be exchanges of ministerial and congregational profiles, visits, possible preaching, and other interaction. If the church decides to make a commitment to a candidate, including a congregational and council decision that “on June xx, 20xx this decision to call will become an official call to \_\_\_\_\_\_”, that is possible, but a candidate is advised to make it clear that he or she is under no obligation to accept the call and cannot make a final decision until after synod’s declaration of eligibility.

**When may a candidate move into the parsonage of a calling church?**

In 1978, synod decided that candidates may move into the parsonage of the calling church prior to the classical exam.

**Where can a search committee find information about candidates?**

Prior to the synod’s declaration of candidacy in June, you will find a list of those who are applying for candidacy on the CRCNA web page under “Potential Candidates for Ministry” (This should be available by early March). After synod, a webpage entitled “Candidates for Ministry” will list all new candidates and candidates not yet called from previous years’ synods. A list of all new candidates will also be published in The Banner. Both the website and The Banner will give contact information for each candidate. If the search committee knows a particular candidate about whom they would like more information, they can request a copy of this ministerial profile from the office of Pastor-Church Relations (lpalsrok@crcna.org). The candidates’ ministerial profiles should be available by early April.

**IF YOU DO CALL A CANDIDATE**

Congregations that choose to call a candidate are wise to consider some of the unique opportunities and needs related to such a call:

**Calling Process**

For most candidates, this is the first time they have experienced the calling process. It is wise for the calling church to work closely with the counselor or other experienced clergy to ensure that the process and conversations are effective in the calling of a candidate.

**Finances**

Congregations can work under the assumption that calling a candidate is less expensive than calling an experienced pastor and therefore more attractive. Although there may be an element of truth to this line of thought, it should be informed by several other realities:

* Pastors are professionally trained individuals and should be paid as a professional. Granted, parish ministry is not the most lucrative profession in the world, but working at a chronically low wage does not contribute to long term health in pastors, their families and their relationship to the church.
* Many pastors and their spouses have been living “hand to mouth” through college and seminary and have postponed a number of significant purchases. As they enter their first church, large purchases such as autos can be anticipated. For married pastors, there could also be the arrival of children, again an expense that can further accentuate the financial needs of the new pastor.
* Most pastors have accumulated significant educational debt, payments for which will begin six months after graduation.

**Expectations**

It is often the case that the various expectations of the pastor, his/her spouse, the church council and the congregation do not coincide. No pastor or congregation will totally meet the expectations each has of the other. Two practices could prove helpful:

* There may be wisdom in retaining the pastor search committee for a year to hold

periodic conversations with the pastor (and spouse). This can help ensure continuity between conversations before the call and experiences after the call.

* At the time of the call, there is great value in developing a “letter of understanding” in which expectations are detailed. These can include anything from “pets in the parsonage” to spouse’s attendance at church events. The idea behind this “letter of understanding” is as much as possible to make explicit expectations that often are unstated and undefined.

**Council Leadership**

This can be one of the most daunting first tasks of a new pastor. If there are capable lay leaders on the council, you may want to select a lay leader to chair council for the first year or two as the pastor adjusts to the many new dimensions of congregational leadership.

**Pro-active Assistance**

It is important that lay leaders are pro-active with the pastor recognizing his/her potential lack of experience with new situations in parish ministry. For example, the lay leaders can help explain regional protocols around death and funerals and weddings. Or, on a Sunday following a tough funeral, pro-active lay leaders might offer to provide pulpit supply for one of the Sunday services. Wise lay leaders can also recognize when the new pastor may be giving too much attention to a chronically needy parishioner and then suggest some strategies for setting limits on that individual.

**Evaluation**

It is important that the new pastor receive helpful, objective feedback early in their tenure in a congregation. In the first 3 to 9 months, the following short form evaluation could be helpful. The elders/deacons could have a conversation with the pastor using the following three questions as a guide:

* What am I doing now that you want me to do more of?
* What am I doing now that you want me to do less of?
* What am I not doing that you’d like me to be doing?

(If these conversations are delayed, these interactions can be seen as negative and may establish an undesirable dynamic around evaluation.)

**Collegial Relationships**

It is important to recognize that for many new pastors and their spouses, there is a significant loss of peer relationships. The seminary experience can be an experience rich with people “in the same boat.” The parish can then feel foreign and isolating. Lay leaders are wise to encourage their new pastor and spouse to find collegial relationships and, where appropriate, provide funding to ensure that these relationships are nurtured.

**Time Management**

It has been said that parish ministry provides a work environment in which there is a great deal of unobserved work. It is also the case that some, if not much, of the life of the parish can be experienced as a gray area of “soft work.” For example, attending the birthday party of a parishioner could be seen as “work” or “not work” depending on a host of variables. For pastors, then, this can be an arena in which they either work too little or too much. It is important that elders/council have periodic conversations with the pastor about this matter. Neither over working nor under working is a sustainable pattern in parish ministry. Processing this subject with the pastor and spouse is an important consideration in the early years of ministry.

**Assumptions**

In summary, it is important that congregations calling a candidate not assume what the congregation might consider obvious. It is likely there will be some disconnections between the culture of the congregation and the culture with which the candidate is most familiar. Making explicit what is implicit is an important habit for both the lay leaders and the candidate as they discover ministry together and as they build the basic, but essential, elements of a ministry team.