

Interview Questions

Four recently called pastors, three Area Ministers, and five congregations in the Massachusetts Conference United Church of Christ contributed to compiling this list of questions which local church Search Committees and candidates used in their search process. We are grateful to Molly Phinney Baskette, Suzanne Woolston Bossert, Curt Preston, Natalie Shiras, Beverly Weinhold, Dale Hempen, Laura Lee Kent, and Peter Wells, as well as to the Church on the Hill in Lenox, First Congregational Church of Somerville, UCC, First Church of Christ in Longmeadow, United Parish of Brookline, and the Wellesley Congregational Church for their assistance.

Questions that Search Committees ask

Opening questions:

- We have read your profile but would like you to describe your faith journey to us.
- Tell us about one of your favorite biblical characters, or Bible story, or a biblical statement that puzzles you. Why?
- As you think about the facets of pastoral ministry, what is it that you feel the most passionately about?

Questions about worship

- How would you describe your style of Sunday worship and how would you involve the music director and deacons?
- What is the wackiest thing you have tried in worship? How did it work out?
- How do you go about preparing a sermon? (One candidate reported that the committee handed her a pericope, and asked her to discuss how she would preach it. She said they seemed to want both some quick ideas of theological themes, plus the resources she uses to prepare sermons).

Working with others, including dealing with conflict

- The position of Associate Pastor requires independent leadership skills working within a team system. What do you see as your greatest strengths in this environment? What do you perceive to be your greatest challenges? Give examples of times when you've worked effectively and not so effectively in this environment.
- How do you feel about working with lay people? Delegating? Sharing?
- Describe a situation in which you got people to change from the way they were doing something to the way you had suggested. How did you accomplish this?
- How would you handle conflict with the church among members or between a member and yourself?
- Despite our small size and lack of ethnic diversity, our congregation is surprisingly diverse in many ways – in thought, attendance, participation, faith commitment, age, income and stewardship. Is that an opportunity or challenge, and how will you address it?
- Should gays be able to marry? What is your experience with Open and Affirming?

Christian education and youth ministry

- What ideas do you have for creating an effective Christian Education program for all ages?
- We have a strong children's ministry and a growing adult education program. One of our next goals is a strong youth program. How would you help us do this in the short term and long term? What do you believe this age group is looking for and needs regarding religion?
- How would you develop meaningful relationships with members of the youth group? Describe how you would work with a youth regarding a personal crisis situation.

Mission and Evangelism

- How do you understand missions and outreach in the life of a church? What personal experience do you have in this realm? What vision might you have for this congregation in this area?
- How would you draw people into the church? How would you get them to come and then to stay?

Theology

- What is your theology of baptism and communion?
- In what sense would you say that you love Jesus?
- What do you think about the movie "The Passion of Christ?"

Your Strengths

- What did you learn about yourself in your field education experience in seminary? Your gifts and your growing edges?
- What do you believe are the three greatest strengths of your ministry and how do you believe they contribute to the success of your ministry here?
- Please describe a challenge or problem you have faced in ministry thus far. How did you respond to this challenge?

Balance and Self-Care, Soul-Care

- Each pastor has his or her own administrative style. How will you balance your time at the office, sermon preparation, pastoral calls, committee meetings, etc.?
- What do you need to feel happy and satisfied in your work? (with colleagues? in relation to a congregation?)
- What causes you stress? How do you handle stress?
- How do you keep balance in your physical, spiritual, social and family life?
- What books are currently on your bedside table? What book have you recently read that has impacted your spiritual life? In what ways?

What appeals to you about this church and made you want to interview with us?

And now, as we prepare to conclude, we'd like to ask: what questions did we not ask you, that you wish we had?

Questions Candidates asked Search Committees

Assessing the Congregation's Strengths

- (To each person on the committee) How did you come to be involved in the church? What do you see as its greatest strength? In what aspect of your church involvement does your faith feel most alive?

- What made you feel loved by your last pastor? How did you show your last pastor that you loved them?
- What is the overall ethos and character of this church? What makes it different or more special from other Protestant churches, including the other three, I see right here on the same street?

Identity

- What role does this church and its members play in supporting the area, conference, regional and national settings of the UCC?
- How important is the denomination to the identity of this local church?

Evangelism and Justice

- How do you understand what needs to happen in order for you to grow? (the difference between being friendly and being truly welcoming) Why do you want to grow? What is the congregation's actual size? Worship attendance? Describe past trends in membership.
- How do you understand your pastor's role as a public figure in the community? (The candidate who asked this does a lot of justice work, and wanted to know if the church would be ashamed of it, ignore it or be excited about it)

Conflict

- Can you give me an example of a change in how you did things that disrupted your community life? How do you respond to change as a church?
- What is your church's relationship to the question of "open and affirming?" Have you ever imagined discussing it as a whole church?
- If someone came up and complained to you about the pastor, what would you say?
- Tell me about the characters in your congregation.

Other Questions

- How is worship planned in this church?
- What are your hopes/dreams for the future?
- How did you arrive at this job description? Is the congregation aware of this job description and is your personnel committee and your governing board on the same page as the search committee on this job description?
- What roadblocks/challenges currently block movement on the congregation's stated goals listed in Profile?
- What is your experience with having a Pastor Parish Relations Committee?

What do you wish search committees would ask candidates?

Tell us about your theology. What are the primary themes of your sermons?

Tell us about a project you have been involved with from idea to implementation.

For a position on a multiple staff: In the ideal circumstance, how would the Senior and Associate Pastors work together for common ministry despite big differences in job description?

What has been your greatest failure (that you are willing to share) and what did you learn from it?

How does ministry differ from other professions?

For second career candidates: What experiences/learning/skills from your previous career will serve you well in ministry? What experiences/learning/skills will you need to leave behind?

What is the funniest thing that has occurred in your ministry?

Where do you find joy and delight in ministry and the Church?

If you had a Sabbatical, what would you do? What would your members/overseers recommend?

Have you ever seriously considered leaving ministry to do something else? If so, what would you do? Why?

What do you wish candidates would ask search committees?

Raise questions from the Church's profile and ask about where the energy is - Other than worship - what do people 'show up for'? What feeds/nourishes/keeps you here?

Tell me about your congregation's understanding and practices of stewardship. Why is it or why is not important to you?

What happens around here when people truly disagree with each other?

How do you prioritize the goals you have set for this church?

What biblical story best describes the "atmosphere/spirit" of your Church?

How do outsiders describe this church?

Why do people stay and join? Or, Why would I want to join this church? Is evangelism important to you? Why or why not?

Why do people leave?

As best as you can name it, what is the vocation/purpose of your church? How would a new person identify this to be true?