

Seeking a Call

There are a number of issues you need to consider as you seek a call from a local church. This article has been written to provide you with some basic guidance. Please seek further support from your local church leadership, or Seminary staff and lecturers as appropriate.

First of all, remember that it is the Lord who calls us to ministry. You have come to Seminary because of your own conviction (and that of your local church), that the Lord has given you gifts and graces to equip you to serve His people (Eph.4:11ff). You are now asking the question: where, Lord, would you have me serve? There is no perfect church, but then there is no perfect pastor. We trust that He has a place and purpose for you, and that a local church will call you to serve them.

This is a spiritual exercise, to be pursued prayerfully. You are seeking the Lord's will. The churches are also prayerfully seeking the Lord regarding who should be called to minister in their situation. We trust that He will guide and direct.

It is assumed for the purposes of this article that you are seeking a call from an Independent Church. Presbyterians, and other denominational groups will have specific procedures, although some of these principles will still apply.

You may be interested to read the FIEC booklet "Calling your Pastor", which outlines the process from the church's point of view.

Preliminary considerations

It would be helpful to ask some questions of yourself (and your wife and family, if applicable) before considering possible churches:

- 1) **Make an honest assessment of your gifts and experience.** Are there some areas of ministry to which you are more clearly suited, and for which the Lord has given you a clear burden? For example:
 - Do you have a greater appetite for preaching to and teaching believers, or are you an evangelist?
 - Are you strong or weak in areas of administration and leadership? What life experience do you have in leading a team?
 - Are you strong or weak in children and youth ministry? Or student ministry? Or ministry amongst the elderly?
 - What aptitude and experience do you have in social ministries – eg debt counselling, food bank, etc..
 - Are you ready to be sole pastor of a church, or would it be wise to seek an assistant pastor, or trainee role initially?

None of this means that you can pick and choose your responsibilities; we are commanded to do the work of evangelist whether we "feel called" to that or not (2Ti.4:5).

We need to shoulder the burdens of church leadership and administration, demonstrating a track record of managing our own households well

(1Ti.3:4). And we should approach every ministry with a heart to serve where we are needed, rather than selecting those areas which are most appealing to us.

However, we need to be realistic about our own gifts, and strengths and weaknesses. If nothing else, the leaders of the church need to be aware of the burdens the Lord has given you, and the areas where further growth and development is required.

- 2) **Make an honest assessment of your convictions in doctrine and church practice.** It would be worth working through a substantial confession such as the WCF or 1689 LBCF, and identifying areas where you agree or disagree. You also need to be clear on your convictions on issues such as divorce, charismatic gifts, ministries of women, and eschatology.
- 3) **Are there any constraints on your location?** For example, do you have responsibilities for elderly relatives?

We are commanded to take our responsibilities to family seriously. However, this does not mean that we will necessarily limit ourselves strictly to a particular geographical area just because it suits us, or is our personal preference. Are you willing to go wherever the Lord sends? Are you willing to go to a challenging situation, or only somewhere where you will be comfortable, and have good schools for your children?

- 4) **It would be helpful to prepare your own CV**, highlighting your experience in both Christian ministry and secular employment. You should also ask church leaders who know you well if they would be willing to provide references when the time comes.
- 5) **Be realistic that seeking a call may take significant time.** The whole process of a call, particularly in congregational churches where the agreement of the church members' meeting is required, can take several months. If then the process ends without you being called, you may have to start again.

So, be ready for that possibility. What will you do if you finish Seminary and have not yet been called to a church? How will you support your family? The Lord may be calling you to serve him in vocational ministry, but it may be "not yet". So, be willing to go back into secular employment in the meantime, and serve faithfully in membership of a local church.

Procedure

The Seminary regularly receives appeals from churches who need pastors. These are shared online.

In addition, you can pursue the following:

- Ask trusted pastors if they know of churches where you might serve as pastor.
- There are regular adverts in EN, ET, etc, from churches looking for pastors.
- For the FIEC, join the Pastors' Network. This will give you opportunities for fellowship in FIEC circles, and contacts with churches.
There are pastoral vacancies advertised on the FIEC website:
<https://fiec.org.uk/jobs>

When you are in touch with a church, they may ask you to fill in an application form and/or come for interview with the elders. Others adopt a more informal approach, and may simply invite you to preach, and then after that explore the possibility of a call.

For congregational churches, you will only be called following a members' meeting where very substantial support for a call is expressed. So, the church leaders may want you to preach several times, and to meet with church members, so that the whole church can get to know you.

Very often, churches will only look seriously at one man at a time. This is to avoid the possibility of division in the church, if half of the congregation prefers one candidate, and half the other. However, there is no requirement for you to restrict yourself to one church at a time. Be open with the church that you are looking at other options, and let them know of progress towards a possible call to another church. The church leadership will have invested considerable time, effort, and prayer, into the process of seeking a pastor; you need to keep them up to date with your situation.

In addition to preaching, and discussions with the elders and deacons, you will want to meet with as many church members as possible. It can be helpful to visit a church for a whole week, engaging with the various ministries of the church, visiting members, and enjoying hospitality in their homes.

Questions for Yourself

You and your wife (if applicable) will want to ask yourselves the following questions:

- Do we have a heart for this people, to love and serve them for the sake of Christ?
- If we moved into this area (not as a pastor), would we join this church?
- Are there significant problems, or irritations, or things you might like to change? How high a priority are these things, and could you live with them as they are?
- Do we have a heart for this community, to reach them with the Gospel? How would you develop the Gospel engagement of the church with its local community?
- Do you have a vision for this church's development over the coming years?

Questions about the Church

As you get to know the church family, and especially with the elders, you will want to take the opportunity to ask questions about the church family. Consider the following

questions, and think about whether you should raise these sorts of issues either formally or informally, with church members or the eldership:

- What are the positive areas of church life which are going well?
- What are the main struggles and challenges at present?
- What is the vision of the church for the future? Where do their priorities lie?
- Is the church strong or weak in evangelism/ personal witness? Is it keen to engage with people in the local community?
- Is the church strong or weak in global vision? What missionaries are supported by the church, or sent out from the church?
- Is this a praying church?
- Is this a loving church, in terms of fellowship? Is hospitality regularly offered and enjoyed by members? Are there home groups, or other means of meaningful engagement?
- How does pastoral care operate in the church?
- How do the ministries of the church operate? Is it a small core of people running everything, or is a larger circle meaningfully involved?

There will be specific questions to be considered in the following areas:

1) Constitution and Doctrinal Basis.

Can you in good conscience work with the current church constitution and doctrinal basis? Remember that as an elder/ pastor of the church, you will be expected to teach and lead within these parameters. There are some areas in particular you will want to consider:

- a) Church Membership. How does someone become a church member? What is expected of members?
- b) Baptism. Is the church credo- or paedo-baptist, or does it operate dual practice? If it is credo-baptist, does it admit only those baptised as believers by immersion to church membership and the Lord's Supper? Is there a policy about baptising children at a certain age? If paedobaptists are admitted to membership are there any restrictions or conditions associated with that? If it is paedobaptist or dual practice, what is its policy towards those baptised as infants in a Roman Catholic, or other church where the Gospel is not preached and baptism is not understood Biblically? In a dual practice church, what would be the policy towards a church member who had been baptised as an infant, but now was convinced of believer's baptism and wanted to be baptised by immersion?
- c) Church Government. What is the relationship between the church eldership and the deacons? Or the eldership and the church membership? Are all decisions

- d) made by the whole membership, or is there strong leadership from the elders with minimal congregational involvement? What are church meetings like?
- e) Is there a good working relationship amongst the elders? How often do they meet? How do they structure their meetings? What do they do if there are disagreements?
- f) Are the elders all united on matters of doctrine and church government?
- g) Are the elders all committed to the work of the church, or ready to resign or retire as soon as you are appointed?
- h) How would you relate to the eldership? Is the pastor considered to be an employee of the church, and therefore reporting to the eldership? Or would you automatically be the chair of the elders? If there is “parity” how does that work in practice?
- i) How do the elders share responsibilities, eg for leadership of church ministries, preaching and leadership of services, pastoral visiting and care, etc.?
- j) Under what circumstances did the previous pastor leave the church?
- k) How does church discipline operate in the church? When was discipline last exercised? What is the attitude of the elders towards a church member who does not attend services for an extended period, or who for example cohabits with someone outside of marriage?
- l) Can you in good conscience preach and teach the doctrines laid out in the doctrinal basis? If you have any reservations, you will need to be honest first with yourself, and then with the church.
- m) Are there any doctrinal convictions not included in the doctrinal basis? For example, a church may have an FIEC Basis of Faith, but be shocked if the pastor did not hold all 5 points of Calvinism.
- n) Does the church have a policy or specific convictions regarding divorce? How has this been handled in the past?
- o) Do you have any doctrinal convictions which you consider important, which are not included in the doctrinal basis? For example, do you believe that the 10 commandments are still binding on Christian believers, or do you hold to a particular eschatological scheme such as dispensationalism?

2) Church Practice

- a) Worship services. Who leads services, and is there a fixed order of service?
- b) What is the current practice regarding hymns and songs? Is there any flexibility in this area if you would like to change, or suggest new songs? What is the musical accompaniment, and how does the music group (if any) relate to the church leadership? Is there flexibility about additional musical instruments, if appropriate?

- c) Is there any policy about the exercise of “charismatic gifts” in worship – eg prophecy and tongues?
- d) What Bible translation does the church use? Why? Is there any flexibility about this?
- e) What are the convictions of the church regarding women’s ministries? For example:
 - Do women pray in the prayer meeting, or speak in church members’ meetings?
 - Are there women deacons, or any objections to women being appointed to this office?
 - Do women lead small group Bible studies?
 - Do women take any part in leading Sunday worship?
 - In which ministries do women take a significant role?
 - Does the church have any women missionaries?
 - Would a woman ever be asked to preach at a Sunday service?
- f) What arrangements are there for the pastoral care, discipleship, and training of women in the church?
- g) Does the church have adequate Safeguarding in place for children, and vulnerable adults?
- h) Does the church have clear policies relating to Equalities legislation, for example regarding women elders, same-sex marriage, and transsexuality?

3) Connectionalism

- What other local churches are there in the area? What relationship does this church have with them?

It would be a problem if a local church is in fellowship with another group which denies central elements of the Gospel, or if the church is affiliated to “Churches Together.” However, it would equally be a problem if no attempt had been made to enjoy fellowship with other Gospel fellowships, even if differing on issues such as baptism, church government, charismatic gifts, etc..

How does the Gospel vision of the church fit together with the ministries of other churches in the area?

- Is the church affiliated to a wider grouping – eg Affinity, FIEC, Grace Baptists, EFCC, Gospel Partnership, etc? Is that affiliation meaningful, so that there is positive engagement with other like-minded churches locally and nationally?
- Does the church see the importance of practical expressions of Gospel unity locally, nationally, and internationally?

4) Expectations

- a) What expectations does the church have of you? For example, preaching twice every Sunday, leading midweek Bible study and prayer meeting, leading the children's work, chairing elders meetings and church meetings, etc?
- b) What expectations does the church have of your wife? Are there certain roles and functions she will be expected to fulfil?
- c) Is there a contract of employment, and what terms and conditions are being offered? This is not the first question to be asked, but it is reasonable to understand what sort of salary the church has in mind. Is there a church house, or will you be expected to rent or buy your own property? How many weeks holiday a year will be offered, and how many Sundays to preach away at other churches? Is there any provision for a Sabbatical every few years, or attendance at Conferences? Is there any provision for expenses, or for a pension?
- d) Would the church be willing to release you for possible ministry opportunities such as leading a Summer camp, or beach team, or teaching or preaching overseas? You will need to be clear if you already have regular commitments which you would like to maintain in the future.

Conclusion

As we said at the outset, there is no perfect church. There will be challenges and sacrifices wherever the Lord calls you. There may be tensions, and some areas of disagreement. But the priority is in your relationship with the leaders and members of the church. You are called to love them, to serve them, and to work through issues together humbly and graciously.

If there are practices in the church which you would like to change, you need to approach this with humility, and first understand how the church's current practice has developed. What is the reasoning of the existing leadership, and what are the obstacles to change? The important thing is not that the elders agree with you at every point, but that there is mutual respect, and the basis of a good working relationship.

There will be challenges of various kinds in every situation. However carefully you pursue a call to a particular church, you cannot guarantee that there will not be unforeseen issues in the future. But we can trust that these challenges will drive you to depend more heavily on the Lord; that they might be the means of your growth in grace and ultimately love for the church. Remember that the priority of Christ, the head of the church, is not for the local church to conform to all of your convictions, but for you and the whole church to be conformed to His likeness.

May the Lord guide and direct, and use you for His glory.