

# INTERVIEWING CANDIDATES

# IDENTIFY CANDIDATES

## WAYS OF FINDING CANDIDATES

Many congregations ask where names come from. There are several possible sources and the Synod Office encourages partnership between the synod, the congregation and pastoral inquires.

### Synod Office

Most possibilities surface through the ongoing work of the Synod Office. Synod staff spend a great deal of their time in conversations relating to pastoral mobility. There are on-going communications with pastors serving in this Synod, including assessments of a pastor's openness to considering a new call. In addition, pastors from outside the Synod are routinely in contact with other synods where they might be open to serving. The Synod Office regularly interviews these pastors and talks to other synod offices about vacancies and pastoral mobility.

The primary criterion used by both the Synod Office and by the Call Committee in discerning the pastor to be called is the Ministry Site Profile. The Call Committee's focus will be on the question: "Where is God leading us, and who will have the pastoral gifts we need to move that direction?"

Hopefully, the pastor is to be more than a chaplain to a membership list, and more than a caretaker of the status quo. The pastor is to be part of God's movement of your congregation into the future. As the Synod staff considers specific pastoral candidates, the congregation's mission needs are the primary focus, and the main question is always whether the skills and interests of the pastor will match the needs of the congregation. Of course, other considerations also come into play:

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**Readiness to move.** Neither a bishop nor a Call Committee can tell a pastor to move who is still feeling called to the present place of service. Timing is often a major factor.

**Family considerations.** You want a pastor to value family life, and sometimes those considerations impact a pastor's openness to considering a call.

**Financial considerations.** Most congregations and most pastors assume that salary will fall generally within Synod guidelines. The Synod staff will not submit a candidate whose salary needs are above the congregation's reach; however, sometimes a question will be raised early on about a

congregation's willingness to go higher, or a candidate's willingness to accept less. But financial negotiations should not be the major factor.

**Housing.** In our Synod, over three-quarters of congregational pastor positions include housing allowance rather than a provided parsonage. Again, the Synod Office will assist in addressing any housing considerations.

**Geographic restrictions.** Some pastors, for reasons of family or spouse vocation, may be restricted as to where they can serve. This must be weighed as a consideration, but should never be the primary reason for considering a candidate or extending a call.

## Pastoral Inquiry

Occasionally a pastor might express interest in a specific vacancy. In such a case, the Synod Office would consider the pastor, with the primary consideration being the suitability of the match of pastoral gifts and congregational needs.

## First Call Candidates

Another option for finding candidates is a pastor who is just graduating from seminary. Many First Call candidates come with a variety of life and often other career experiences. First Call Candidates are looking for congregations who will be open to helping the new pastor learn what his or her pastoral identity is. A first call congregation will have to be a strong healthy congregation, free from extreme conflict. Many first call pastors have high energy and enthusiasm fresh out of school and are full of lots of creative ideas. If you are interested in this option please let your Synod Office member know early in the call process. First Call Candidates are interviewed one at a time, and therefore a congregation is not given a “batch” of names. The Synod Office will give more in depth information if this is a desired option for you.

## Ecumenical Full Communion Partners

The ELCA is in full communion partnership with several other denominations. This means that your next pastor does not have to be an ELCA pastor but could be another denomination. Full communion is when two churches develop a relationship based on a common confessing of the Christian faith and a mutual recognition of baptism and sharing of the Lord's Supper. At printing of this handbook, full communion relationships are established with the Presbyterian Church USA, United Church of Christ, Reformed Church in America, The Episcopal Church, the United Methodist Church and The Moravian Church. For a current list of full communion partners please go to <http://www.elca.org/en/Faith/Ecumenical-and-Inter-Religious-Relations/Full-Communion>

## Congregational Referrals

Sometimes candidates surface through members of the congregation. It should be made clear to the congregation that just because a name is suggested, it does not guarantee that the pastor will be interviewed.

If there are congregational referrals, the Call Committee should share those names with the Synod Office. The Synod Office will look seriously into the possibility - checking with that pastor's bishop, determining his/her openness to call, considering the suitability of the match, etc. Regardless of whether the person is recommended by the Synod Office for an interview, a report will always be given to the Call Committee regarding the candidate(s) lifted up by the congregation. A sample

Nomination Form is included on the next page for your reference. A sample letter is also included if the call committee wishes to refer candidate's to participate.

No matter what method is used to find candidates, of the ones listed above or any other such as websites, advertising in professional journals and other publications the procedure to find candidates is to clear all the candidates through the Synod Office. This is most importantly because of the national ELCA checks and balances that are in place for the safety of congregations.

## CALL COMMITTEE REFERRAL OF CANDIDATE FORM

Is there a leader that you think would be a good match for \_\_\_\_\_ Church? Please include the information below and the call committee will give the name prayerful consideration.

Pastor's Name:

Mailing Address:

Email Address:

Telephone number (area code/phone number)

Pastor's Current Congregation and address (if known)

1. How do you see this pastor's gifts, leadership skills, and abilities helpful to furthering our congregation's mission and ministry?

2. What is your relationship with this pastor? (How do you happen to know this pastor?)

3. For what reason might this pastor want to consider our congregation for his/her next call?

4. Other comments:

Call Committee Chair Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Congregation: \_\_\_\_\_

# SAMPLE INVITATION TO INTERVIEW LETTER

To be printed on church letterhead

Rev. (Name)

Congregation

Address

Dear Pastor (Name),

We are writing on behalf of the people of \_\_\_\_\_ Lutheran Church, an ELCA congregation located in \_\_\_\_\_, WI. We are currently in search of a pastor to lead us in mission and ministry. \_\_\_\_\_, WI is located in south-central Wisconsin. We are a well established church having just celebrated our 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of ministry in the community. Our average worship attendance is 140 people. Our staff includes a full time secretary, part time custodian, and part time music minister in addition to several volunteers.

We are seeking a Pastor who can lead our congregation into the future. We want to reach out to the Unchurched in our area as well as maintain the high level of worship and ministry that we have learned to appreciate over the years.

If you or someone you know might be interested in this position, please have your bishop send your "Rostered Leader" form to the bishop of the South-Central Synod of Wisconsin 6401 Odana Rd Suite #20 Madison, WI 53719 with a note indicating your interest in \_\_\_\_\_ Lutheran Church. To discover more about \_\_\_\_\_ Lutheran Church, you can also visit our website at [www.???.org](http://www.???.org).

We thank you in advance for your prayerful consideration as \_\_\_\_\_ Lutheran Church seeks God's plan for our congregation.

In Christ's Service,

Call Committee Chair  
\_\_\_\_\_ Lutheran Church

# INTERVIEWING

## PLANNING

Determine what information you want from the pastoral candidates, and what information you want to send to them. Some things others have found helpful are

From you to the pastor:

- The Ministry Site Profile
- Copies of the congregation's last several annual reports
- Several newsletters, publicity brochures, etc., describing the congregation
- Information about the community - Chamber of Commerce info, etc.
- Topics/questions to be explored in the interview/visit
- Sample bulletins from recent Sunday services
- Anything else, be creative

From the pastor:

- Annual reports from his/her current congregation;
- Any other resume or mobility information not already shared;
- Original material - sermons, class outlines, continuing education projects, etc; and
- A few bulletins from recent Sunday services

As soon as the call committee receives candidates' materials, the chairperson should contact each candidate to let the candidates know:

- that the committee has her or his materials,
- an idea regarding when the candidate can anticipate further contact
- the committee's request for additional material from the candidate,
- the additional materials which he/she can expect from the committee.

The Call Committee should also make plans for the interview process. You may want to think twice before releasing a candidate before an initial interview (either by phone or in person). Some congregation's best candidates were ones that did not look the best on paper! And the reverse is then also true. Some of the best candidates on paper turn out to be a wrong fit when you meet in person. It is important to be open to the candidate's interests as well, but some elements of the visit format might be:

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- Time for the candidate to experience the parish community;
- A walking or driving tour;
- A meal in a local place (restaurant, home, church etc) or some other type of hospitality;
- A look at housing, educational facilities, library, and other places that may be of interest as reflected in your reports and/or the Pastor's personal situation.

It is wise to contact candidates every few weeks throughout the process. Otherwise they may conclude that the call committee isn't interested in them and turn to other possibilities.

When the plan is to interview more than one candidate, an attempt should be made to conduct each interview in the same setting and manner. This helps the Call Committee fairly compare multiple candidates. The Call Committee should be consistent in having the same person lead the interview each time and plan for committee members to ask the same basic questions of each candidate. This will assure that all the bases are covered in each instance once the interview process begins. If the Call Committee eats in a restaurant with one candidate, the same pattern should be followed with any subsequent candidates. If you sit in the brown chair to the right of the candidate for one interview you should sit in the brown chair to the right of the candidate for each subsequent interview. The length of time for the interview should be as similar as possible as well.

If a Call Committee member has a conflict and will be unable to attend an interview, the interview should be rescheduled. It is extremely important, in fairness to all candidates and for the effective functioning of the committee, that all Call Committee members be present.

## TIPS FOR INTERVIEWING

A crucial aspect of interviewing is the art of listening. To be a good listener, several things are important.

**INTEREST:** The person being interviewed has invested time and effort to be with you. Therefore, he/she is worthy of the committee's respect, interest, and undivided attention.

**PATIENCE:** The committee gives the person time to formulate thoughtful answers.

**LINKING:** Building on what the person has said, the interviewer asks questions that pick up on information already shared in the interview. This indicates that you are listening.

**ALERTNESS:** The committee listens for key words and phrases, making certain that they are understood by all.

**CONCENTRATION:** The interviewers listen for main ideas, not just facts and figures. They should ask themselves, "What is this person telling us?"

**CLARIFY QUESTIONS:** Interviewers ask clarifying questions to make certain they really

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understand what the person is saying. If a response is not clear, the committee should ask for it to be clarified. Doing so does not reflect ignorance but demonstrates that the committee is truly interested and trying to understand what the person is attempting to communicate.

**DELIBERATION:** Committee members guard against coming to a hasty decision about a candidate. Thorough dialogue with other Call Committee members and listening to all candidates is essential before making a final decision.

**BODY LANGUAGE:** Committee members can learn to set the candidate at ease by their own relaxed body language, which conveys openness, and a welcoming, non-defensive atmosphere.

## OUTLINE OF AN INTERVIEW

The Call Committee should designate a committee member to host the candidate. Be certain that this committee member is on hand well before the candidate's anticipated arrival at the interview location. If the interview is to take place in the church building, and if time permits, the host might consider providing a guided tour of the church facilities before the interview. The Call Committee may also decide to host the candidate at a local restaurant before the interview.

Following brief, informal introductions, a member of the Call Committee may conduct an opening devotional. Or, prior to his/her arrival, some committees invite the candidate to lead devotions or a brief Bible study.

Following the devotional, each member of the Call Committee may again introduce him or herself to the candidate, identifying his or her vocation and role played in the congregation.

The committee member chosen to direct the interview should then outline for the candidate the anticipated procedure for the interview, indicating the time allotted for the interview, the “question and answer” format, and an invitation to the candidate to ask questions of the Call Committee.

Before the committee’s pre-selected questions are posed, it is appropriate for the Call Committee chairperson to ask the candidate to tell the committee something about himself or herself. The invitation, “Tell us something about yourself,” is purposefully general and open-ended. A time limit of from five to seven minutes is suggested for this opening self-introduction by the candidate.

The formal questioning, with prepared questions, now begins, remembering that it is very important that the same questions are asked of each candidate for later comparison.

Questions may be assigned to various members of the Call Committee, thereby assuring that all present actively participate.

If the response received from the candidate seems incomplete or unclear, the person asking the question may pose a follow-up question, asking for elaboration, clarification, or examples. The committee should not expect finely polished, textbook accurate answers to spur-of-the-moment questions. If committee members are not satisfied with the answer, clarification can be requested before the next question is asked.

A committee member may be designated to record candidate responses during the interview, for further review by the committee. Note taking should be done as unobtrusively as possible, and if note taking is to occur, the committee chair should explain the purpose of the note taking to the candidate. The Call Committee might consider creating interview sheets that will have your questions and room for notes for each candidate for your reference at a later date.

In formulating questions, avoid ones which can be answered with a response of “yes” or “no.” For example, the questioner should not ask, “Do you think you are effective in your ministry to youth?” The candidate will almost surely answer, “yes.” Rather, ask, “Describe how you minister to youth. Give us some examples of how you have worked effectively with youth in your present or former parish.”

When a clergy couple is being interviewed, a separate call is issued to each, even if one position is being shared, so structure the interview so that the Call Committee has some time with each pastor individually, and some time with them together. Feel free to ask the same question of each person - don't make assumptions about similarities! You will also need to contact Portico for clergy couple particularities.

When the committee has completed its list of preselected questions, the committee chair may invite additional questions. Though the call committee is “in charge” of the interview, it is helpful to remember that the interview is intended to be a dialogue and not an inquisition! This is intended to be a “mutual” interview. Invite the candidate to ask questions and provide additional comments during the interview.

The committee member leading the interview is responsible for keeping the interview within the anticipated time period previously established. Prolonged interviews are usually counterproductive. If all is not accomplished in the first interview, a second interview can be scheduled.

In concluding the interview, the candidate may be invited to “answer questions not asked” or make any other comment he or she would like to make. The candidate should be thanked for coming and encouraged to be in phone contact with a designated member of the Call Committee, should there be additional questions which occur to the candidate in the days following the interview. The Call Committee should indicate to the candidate the approximate time table involved in the completion of the congregation’s call procedures. If possible, at the conclusion of the interview, the committee should reimburse the candidate for any expenses incurred, such as travel costs, overnight accommodations, and meals. If the reimbursement cannot occur at the time of the interview, it should be completed within the following week and an appropriate explanation given to the candidate. The following page includes a sample expense voucher.

Some call committees find it useful to have a mock interview before the candidates come. The interim pastor or another local pastor might be willing to do this. It will give you a chance to try out how the rhythm of the interview will go and practice what each individual’s role will be.

## EXPENSE VOUCHER

You will be responsible for reimbursing candidates for their travel expenses. Here is a sample voucher you might use. These expenses should be reimbursed promptly after an interview.

# INTERVIEW EXPENSE VOUCHER

For \_\_\_\_\_ Church

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Travel by car round trip:

\_\_\_\_\_ miles @ \_\_\_\_\_ current IRS mileage rate.....\$ \_\_\_\_\_  
Travel by air .....\$ \_\_\_\_\_  
Meals.....\$ \_\_\_\_\_  
Lodging.....\$ \_\_\_\_\_  
Miscellaneous.....\$ \_\_\_\_\_

Total \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Please attach copies of your receipts to this voucher.

X/ \_\_\_\_\_

Candidate                      Address

X/ \_\_\_\_\_

Call Committee Chairperson

## PHONE & WEB/DIGITAL INTERVIEWING

Some congregations choose to conduct the first interview by telephone or by webcam over the internet using free programs such as Zoom. Face-to-face communication is always the best. Much of our communication happens on a nonverbal level, therefore, it is usual best to conduct all interviews in person. Because of certain circumstances (such as extremely high travel expenses, inability of the candidate to travel at a particular time, etc.), a phone or web cam interview is the only possibility. If one candidate is to be initially interviewed in this way, it is recommended that all the candidates be initially interviewed in this way. This places everyone on the same level for the first interview.

If the initial interview is conducted by telephone, it is suggested that it occur over a speaker or conference phone so that several members of the Call Committee can participate in the interview.

If the initial interview is conducted by phone or web cam, it should follow (as much as possible) the same procedure as is outlined in the preceding pages.

# SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

It is likely that you will have questions for each candidate at three levels: congregation specific questions, general questions and pastor specific questions.

## Congregation Specific Questions

The specific content of the interview should reflect the position that is being filled, in your particular congregation, at this particular time in its history.

## General Questions

This list of possible general questions is not comprehensive, but merely suggests issues you might want to raise with the candidate in areas connected with parish life. There are far too many questions here, so be very selective in choosing only a few that will shape the primary part of the interview with each candidate.

### Worship/Preaching

- Describe how you go about preparing for the worship service on Sunday morning.
- Think back in your ministry and tell me about the most difficult sermon you ever preached.
- Share some of your thoughts about the worship life of a congregation.

### Social Ministry/Outreach

- Tell me how you evaluate community needs and community strengths.
- Describe how you have contributed to the quality of life in your community.
- Describe how you go about motivating members of your congregation to respond to community needs.

### Administrator/Leader

- Describe the steps you take normally when working with groups to achieve consensus or cohesiveness.
- How would you describe your style of leadership in overseeing the work of the congregation?
- Tell me about a period in your life when you had to manage multiple demands in your work and how you determined priorities.

### Teaching the Faith

- How do you evaluate the faith development of others?
- Describe your approach to helping adults to grow in their faith.
- Describe your approach to teaching children and young people about the Christian faith.

### Stewardship

- Describe how you have helped others grow in their personal stewardship.
- In what ways have you helped members understand the management of their money and their responsibilities as Christian stewards?
- Describe the development of your personal sense of Christian stewardship.

### Evangelism

- Describe ways in which you typically become acquainted and associate with unchurched people in your community.

- What kind of guidance and training do you provide members of your congregation for reaching unchurched persons in the community?

### Interpersonal Climate

- What steps do you take in helping others feel secure, trusted, and open with you?
- When pressure mounts, how do you maintain your cool in ministry?
- Describe an experience where conflict arose between you and another person and how resolution was finally achieved.

### Ministry in Crisis/Counseling

- Describe your style of ministry to persons in crisis.
- Describe how you have used the establishment of boundaries to strengthen your ministry.
- How do you assess your own professional limitations when ministering to persons in crisis?

### Interpreter of Theology

- Describe ways in which you communicate the faith.
- Describe your skills as teacher and preacher.
- What resources do you use to remain theologically and Biblically fresh and current?

### Innovator

- Describe your approach to introducing new ideas in the congregation.
- Describe your current vision for ministry and how you would help others in the congregation to capture that vision.
- Think back in your ministry and describe a situation that was stagnant or failing and describe how you stepped in to revitalize it.

### Denominational Leadership

- Describe how you have guided your congregation into understanding their relationship to the greater church.
- Describe your participation in the work of the church beyond the congregation, including ecumenical relationships, church agencies, and institutions.
- Describe what your congregation believes to be their role as a congregation of the ELCA.

### Personal Growth

- Describe some of your most important accomplishments and how you went about reaching those goals.
- How do you work at making yourself more effective in your work?
- Briefly describe ways in which you care for yourself physically, emotionally, socially, and spiritually.

### Your Call to Ministry

- Briefly describe the events which led you to prepare for the ministry.
- Describe the process of deliberation which helps you determine God's call.
- In what ways has your call to ministry changed over the years?

### Pastor Specific Questions

By exploring the candidate's Rostered Leader Profile, find questions that help you come to know him/her as a spiritual person and leader. Take time here to clarify questions that may have arisen from reviewing the mobility forms.

## Questions You Should NOT Ask

Some of the following questions are not appropriate in an interview setting and might be legally prohibited for an employer to ask.

- How old are you? When are planning to retire?
- Are you married? Or divorced?
- How will your spouse be involved in the church?
- What is your sexual orientation?
- Do you plan to get married?
- Do you have children?
- Do you intend to start a family?

Instead ask “Tell us about yourself and your family.” This will get at many of the answers you are looking for above.

Other questions to be careful about:

- Do you belong to any social or political groups?
- Do you suffer from any disabilities or illness?

Instead ask, “Is there anything else about yourself that you think is important for us to know?” Again, you will get answers to these questions if needed. When information is freely offered by a candidate it is then appropriate for conversation.

## Questions Candidates May Ask

An effective interview is a two-way street, with the candidate also bringing questions and concerns. Allow time and opportunity for the candidate to ask questions and be prepared to address them.

Questions that may be asked of you as a committee:

- What is the focus of your congregation? Describe your mission.
- What is the role of staff and what is the role of the laity in your congregation?
- How many people are involved in leadership roles? How are lay people involved in worship?
- In your opinion, how are decisions made in your congregation?
- What long- and short-term goals has the congregation adopted? When was the last time an in-depth self study was conducted?
- What is the congregation’s commitment to support of and partnership with the synod and the ELCA?
- How does the congregation respond to change and how are changes made?
- What part should family members of staff play in the congregation?
- What would you display on a highway billboard regarding your congregation?
- Why did the previous pastor leave?
- Are there skeletons in the closet that I should know about in considering the call here?

## SUBSEQUENT INTERVIEWS

You may decide to invite one or more of the candidates back for additional interviews. This can be a time of deeper, more specific questions. Both the Call Committee and candidates will most likely have additional things they would like to talk about further. Might there be key leaders that should be involved in the next interviews? Staff, lay leaders, etc. This might also be a time to invite the candidates' families to experience your community if you have not already done so.

## DECISION MAKING

Please bathe each interview with prayer. While the interview is still fresh in the minds of committee members, it might be useful to reconvene the Call Committee, upon the candidate's departure, for sharing initial impressions. It is important that these shared impressions are recorded for later reference. It will also be important to promptly notify each candidate of the next step in the process. It is also wise not to make a final decision immediately after an interview. Give all the Call Committee members time to process what they have heard and schedule a follow-up meeting to make a final decision. This allows time for first impressions, further reflection and prayer.

The next several pages have sample letters for various situations relating to interviews. As you send these correspondences, please include a copy to the Synod Office.

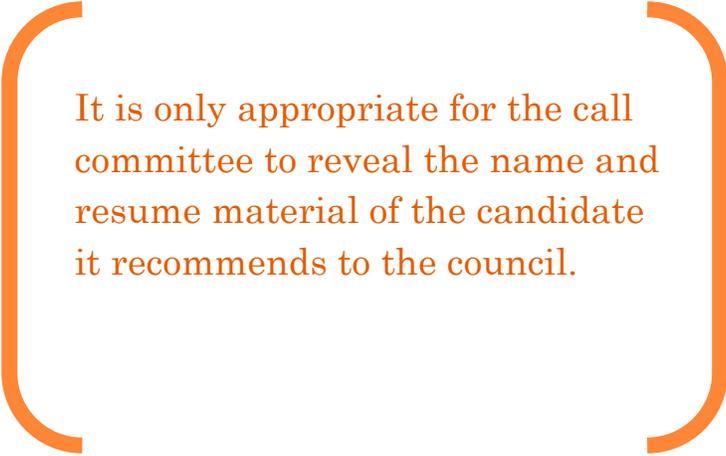
## NEED FOR MORE NAMES

After all of your hard work of interviewing, occasionally, there is a need for the Call Committee to receive more names. This might be because none of the candidates were a good fit or the top candidate was in a process at another congregation and has taken another call, or any number of other reasons. If you decide as a Call Committee to ask for more names, please be in touch with your Synod Office member to begin this process.

If this does happen, be in touch with the congregation as well, to let them know you have asked for more names. Continue at every opportunity to build trust with the congregation and let them know what you are doing, as much as confidentiality will allow.

## CONFIDENTIALITY

The call committee keeps the names and resumes of all candidates in the strictest confidence throughout the committee's work. The reason for maintaining confidentiality is in respect of the other parties involved in the process: the potential pastor and her/his present congregation. Pastors are often open to considering other calls as a way of discerning God's will for them. However, a congregation which learns that its pastor is open to other possibilities often assumes that the pastor is indeed going to leave. Often pastors make a decision to stay where they are but further ministry is disrupted by a premature disclosure of their involvement in a call process. It is only appropriate for the call committee to reveal the name and resume material of the candidate it recommends to the council. Good candidates have refused further contact with call committees who have not respected their desire for confidentiality.



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## VISITING A CANDIDATE IN OWN SETTING

This is a very important step that is about much more than just hearing the pastor preach. With today's technology, it is easy to hear or see through webcast the sermon. However, while you are visiting you will get a chance to see what kind of worship leader the pastor is and experience her/him in person. You will also have to opportunity to observe the pastor interacting with congregation members. Check with the candidate for a range of possible Sundays to visit. You would hate to come when he/she was on vacation or not preaching. But you also want your visit to be a bit of a surprise so you can see an "average" Sunday worship. Please be respectful of the fact that the congregation may not know that their pastor is seeking a new call. Therefore, when greeted by someone sitting next to you, do not acknowledge that you are from a call committee, just simply say that you are a visitor for the day.

## CHECKING REFERENCES

Checking references is an important step. It is more than just icing on the cake, as the information gleaned can facilitate additional questions for a second interview. The candidate's bishop is listed as a reference. The synod office receives a confidential bishop's recommendation. If there are issues of misconduct or concern, we would most certainly share those with the call committee. Although one might assume that all reference will be a ringing endorsement, this is not always the case. Some things a call committee might want to ask are:

- When did (name) work for your congregation/organization? Could you confirm starting and ending employment dates?
- Why did (name) leave?
- What was her/his starting and ending salary?
- What was her/his position? Can you describe the job responsibilities?
- Did (name) miss a lot of work? Was s/he frequently late? Were there any issues you are aware of that impacted her/his job performance?
- Did (name) supervise other employees? How effectively? If I spoke to those employees, how do you think they would describe (name's) management style?
- How did (name) handle conflict? How about pressure? Stress?
- Did you evaluate (name's) performance? Can you speak to his/her strong and weak points? What was noted as needing improvement during this performance review?
- What was (name's) biggest accomplishment while working for your congregation/organization?
- Would you call (name) if the opportunity arose again?
- If I describe the position we are hiring for to you, could you describe how good a fit you think (name) would be for the position?
- Can you describe this person's experience working as a member of a team?
- Is there anything I haven't asked that you would like to share with me?