



Mennonite Church
USA

Mennonite Church
Canada

When You Seek a Place for Ministry

You are presently in a ministry position and you are unsure whether to stay or leave. How do you decide?

Note: If you are seeking your first ministry position, move on to the next section.

How does one respond to thoughts of leaving a pastorate and/or inquiries concerning potential new places of ministry? Over the life cycle of a pastorate there is a gradual shift of the question you should be asking yourself from “Why would I leave?” to “Why should I stay?” In other words, in the early years the challenge is to justify leaving, while as the years move on, the onus shifts to justify staying.

Years 1-3. Focus energy on listening, learning, loving. Block out thoughts of leaving as much as possible. Thoughts of leaving may be related to changes and adjustments both you and the congregation are experiencing. If they persist, test them with a mentor or colleague. Also test your thoughts with your area conference minister.

Years 4-6. Assume that you are moving into the most productive years of your ministry in this congregation. Unless there are clear signals of major problems, let any thought of leaving rest in peace while you go about the work of pastoring.

Years 7-9. Ask yourself about the significance of your leadership in this congregation. What continues to be fulfilling and challenging? Are you still experiencing personal growth in ministry? Be honest. Be realistic. Be kind to yourself. Listen for responsible feedback on unmet needs and assess whether you can with enthusiasm rise to the challenge.

Years 10 and beyond. Affirm all that is going well and note how the congregation and you continue to grow, but make honest notes of persons not being ministered to or areas of the church’s life you are not adequately serving. Identify and list reasons you see for continuing your ministry here beyond 12 years; share and discuss this with your area conference minister and trusted friends. What will be the long-term effect on the congregation if you stay? What will be the long-term effect on you if you stay?

Decisions about one’s personal and vocational future grow out of both one’s heart and one’s head. Do they agree? Is there a clear sense of God’s call? How does one respond to the call of the church? Transition times are often lonely and leave one with many ambivalent and even conflicting feelings and thoughts. Sometimes God calls us to venture into the confusion of transition as an act of faith.

You have decided to seek a new ministry position. How do you begin?

Note: there are fuller details in the Instruction document at http://mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/InstructionsForCandidates_CandidateMinTransition.pdf Make your intent known to your area conference minister and/or the denominational office of ministerial leadership to explore next steps. If possible, it is advisable to register your intent at least six to eight months in advance of the time a place of service is desired. Occasionally pastoral commitments are made as far as one year in advance.

- The degree to which this decision is confidential is not easily discerned. In general, pastors are counseled not to announce their resignation prior to entering into serious negotiation with another congregation or finding a new position, but circumstances may determine otherwise.
- Prepare an accurate and balanced portrait of yourself by completing the Ministerial Leadership Information form (MLI) by contacting the Denominational office of ministerial leadership. The MLI is available online for easier access and updates. If you filled out an MLI in the past, please know that a MLI should be updated if it is about three years old or more.
- Once you hit the submit button on your online MLI, it will be sent to your denominational office of ministerial leadership. A completed form indicates your openness to considering a ministerial call. If you are open to serving in either the United States or Canada, you will indicate that on your form before you submit. Your materials will then be made available to the other country.
- The designated denominational office of ministerial leadership will send out reference forms to the persons you have identified. When these have been returned, the office will write a verbatim composite of references.
- The denominational office of ministerial leadership makes available a list of the names of persons available for ministerial calling to area conference ministers. Upon request for further information on specific persons, the office sends copies of the MLI with the verbatim composite of references to area conference ministers, and they in turn make them available to congregational search committees.

You have been given one or several options. How do you proceed with the “stage of exploration”?

Contacts with the candidate will normally come from either an area conference minister or congregational leaders. If the latter, it is important to ask whether they are working with the area conference minister. It is also important for you to have contact with the area conference minister for the congregation. MLI's are always sent to the area conferences, and never directly to a congregation.

- You may request a copy of a Congregational Information Form, constitution and bylaws, and any other relevant information from the congregation.
- You may be asked to furnish either an audiotape or videotape as an example of your preaching and worship leadership. It's up to you how or whether to respond to such requests.
- The candidate is advised to explore with the area conference minister of the calling congregation concerns or issues relative to this potential candidacy.

- It is generally desirable for a candidate to meet with the search committee to explore the potential relationship and to assess further whether job expectations and other concerns might make this a good match. The candidate does not yet meet the congregation as a whole, nor is the candidacy public.
- It is assumed that the candidate will prepare carefully for this interview by reviewing the Congregational Information Form. Bring pertinent questions of issues which are important to you to this meeting with the committee. Study the Interview Guidelines to assist your preparation.

Note: During this search stage, it is acceptable to have initial get acquainted interviews with a number of search committees. It is not ethical though to enter into a formal exploration stage or a formal candidating process with more than one congregation at a time. Nor is it ethical for a congregation to enter into a process with more than one candidate.

You have been invited as the primary candidate. How do you proceed through “the negotiation stage”?

- The key indicator that congregation and candidate have moved from exploration to negotiation comes with an invitation to visit and meet the congregation in some public and open way.
- New assumptions enter into the relationship as a candidate moves from exploration to negotiation. It means that the search committee has identified you as their one preferred candidate and is ready to recommend you to their congregation. It also means that you will now negotiate only with this congregation, until such a time as decisions are finalized. It means that you are serious in your intent to accept a call to ministry to this place, should it be forthcoming; in other words, you are no longer just exploring.
- Several things should happen when you (and your spouse/family) are invited to meet the congregation; among these you might expect the following:
 - You should again meet with the search committee and the governing body (church board, council, deacons or elders) as well as other key groups in the congregation.
 - You will be given some opportunity to make a public presentation, usually a sermon in the context of worship.
 - Hopefully there will be an occasion where all members can meet you informally and personally.
 - You should be given a chance to raise questions you have about the congregation and your possible ministry there.
 - You will be given opportunity to see the larger community and to assess what living there would mean for you and your family.

During this visit you will enter into specific negotiations regarding salary, benefits, reimbursements, housing, vacations/holidays, sabbatical policy, beginning date, length of initial term, and moving arrangements. You should also inquire about anticipated procedures and timing for decision. (It is recommended that you use a Covenant of Understanding to make certain all-important issues are covered.) This is also the time for further clarification of job descriptions and role expectations. (See the denominational Salary Guidelines for background and a Covenant of Understanding worksheet on the website at <http://mennoniteusa.org/resource/pastor-salary-guidelines/>)

- The congregation will normally make a decision on extending a call within the week. You will be informed promptly of the decision. If it results in a call, you will also receive written notification with specific details of the negotiated agreement or the proposed Covenant of Understanding.
- After you have received a written invitation to ministry, you should respond in writing with your decision regarding the congregation's call.
- Notify the denominational office of ministerial leadership of your new assignment.
- Pray for the welfare of the relationship between the congregation, yourself, and God. Work positively to make it go well.

What do you do when nothing happens and you are anxiously waiting?

- Keep perspective. Remember that waiting is a biblical virtue, especially waiting patiently for God to act. Waiting is part of the uncertainty involved in most life transitions.
- Congregations and committees often move cautiously and slowly, or at least so it seems to many candidates. Try to understand how they perceive the process.
- You may have registered your intent to be available for a pastoral call, but no options even begin to present themselves. Sometimes a phone contact with the denominational office of ministerial leadership is helpful. Also, follow-up contacts with area conference ministers are always appropriate.
- If you suspect there are significant problems involved, either in terms of how congregations may perceive you or how you relate to a specific area conference minister or ministerial staff person, it may be important to invite counsel from a trusted and reliable colleague. The persons in place to offer assistance are also human and sometimes fail, even when they seek to be as responsible as possible. Use the network of friends and relationships you have cultivated for support, counsel, and references. Also counsel with the denominational office of ministerial leadership.
- It is best to make contact with an area conference minister first regarding a pastoral opening even if the congregation has advertised in the church media. It is also appropriate to make direct contact to a congregation who has advertised in the church media.
- Remember that in our polity we function with a calling system rather than a placement system. As in most vocations, there is no guarantee that a call will be received or that a position will be offered.
- Seek alternative employment, even of a temporary nature, if it is helpful for you and necessary for your family's financial well-being. Vocational testing and counseling may also be appropriate and helpful.