

Questions for a potential pastoral candidate...and answers!

Written by Tim Black

Monday, 12 March 2007 13:28 - Last Updated Saturday, 09 October 2010 11:22

A church that is looking for a pastor right now asked me the following questions, and I thought I'd post my answers for any who may benefit from them. Some of the abbreviations used are:

WCF - The Westminster Confession of Faith

FOG - The OPC's Form of Government

DPW - The OPC's Directory for Public Worship

MIF - My answers on the OPC's Ministerial Information Form

Ministry and Church Life

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What is your vision for the local church?

The local church should be committed to carrying out what we understand its work to be in FOG 2.4: "The work of the church, in fellowship with and obedience to Christ, is divine worship, mutual edification, and gospel witness." The church's first priority is to worship God, according to His word, in the special acts of worship on the Lord's Day and the general service we render to Him in all of our actions. Mutual edification is the heart of Christian fellowship, and is accomplished through mutual kindness and concern, and teaching and encouraging one another. Gospel witness is the chief function of the church toward those in the surrounding community (Matt. 28:19-20). It is through worship, fellowship, and witness that the church properly serves God, our fellow believers, and the lost in the world.

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What is the role of mercy ministry with respect to vision and outreach?

The church should worship God, edify believers, and witness to the lost. As part of our general worship, and as a backdrop to our special worship, God requires us "to do justice, and to love mercy." (Micah 6:8) Likewise, to reap the fruit of eternal life among believers as well as unbelievers we must "do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of

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faith." (Gal. 6:10) These considerations mean that mercy ministry must be done first for God's glory, second for those in the church, and only third for those outside the church. It must be integral to the vision of the church.

But what is its role in outreach? Micah 6:8 teaches that showing mercy is so much a part of worshiping our merciful God that we may not cheapen it by considering it merely a means to buy a poor person's interest in the gospel. Mercy ministry is not dispensable, because God cares for the needy. But Matt. 28:19-20 teaches that mercy ministry must be done in service of the church's high calling of making disciples of every nation. It cannot take on a higher priority than outreach.

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What is the role of elders in the church? What do you want elders to do?

Ruling elders must "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God." (Acts 20:28) In the words of FOG 10.3, "Ruling elders, individually and jointly with the pastor in the session, are to lead the church in the service of Christ. They are to watch diligently over the people committed to their charge to prevent corruption of doctrine or morals. Evils which they cannot correct by private admonition they should bring to the notice of the session. They should visit the people, especially the sick, instruct the ignorant, comfort the mourning, and nourish and guard the children of the covenant. They should pray with and for the people. They should have particular concern for the doctrine and conduct of the minister of the Word and help him in his labors." I want the elders to do these things.

The pastor is not the sole ordained leader in the church. The session leads the church. The pastor retains a prominence by virtue of his gifts and calling to teach, and the time he devotes to the ministry. But the pastor has no greater authority in the church than do his fellow elders. For these reasons it is good for the pastor to set the session's agenda, lead and moderate the meeting, but not to vote unless necessary.

Because elders should be "able to teach" (1 Tim. 3:2) I believe it is best for an elder at least occasionally to exercise that gift in public by leading a Bible study, teaching Sunday School, or leading in worship. I am willing for a ruling elder to "on occasion...exhort...the congregation as a

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part of public worship" (DPW 3.8) if there is no teaching elder available to do so. If a ruling elder desires to exhort regularly, he should seek to be ordained as a teaching elder.

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What is the role of the pastor? See MIF.

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How much time per week do you apportion among work, family, and play?

My aim right now is to work 40 hours on my responsibilities as stated supply for Trinity OPC, Novato, 5 hours as a web developer, and the rest with my wife taking care of our household or doing something recreational. We walk together for up to an hour 2-3 mornings per week, and go out for dinner, a movie, or a short trip about once a month.

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How much time do you typically spend on sermon preparation? What is your approach to sermon preparation?

Presently I spend about 15 hours per sermon. My preparation time has decreased with practice, and I expect it will continue to do so.

I prefer to preach through one book of the Bible at a time, for the congregation's sake and mine. As the foundation of my preparation I read the whole book of the Bible within which the passage falls and pray for God's help to understand His message in that book as He conveyed it through the human author's words. Then I study outlines of the whole book given in study Bibles and commentaries, and in connection with reading those books' introductions to the Biblical book I make an outline of my own sufficiently detailed to teach a one hour Sunday School class on the book. This way I can divide up the sermon series into sub-series that can be introduced

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intelligibly. For example, in Novato we are beginning a four sermon series on having a Christian worldview from Colossians 2:8-23, which will be followed by two series on Christian character and Christian relationships from subsequent sections of Colossians. This also makes it possible to take a temporary "vacation" from a long book of the Bible to study a different book for a time.

After getting an idea of the general divisions of the book, following the literary structure of the book, I break the book down into passages short enough to cover in one sermon (10 verses or less for an epistle, a chapter for a narrative book), study each passage in the original language, read commentaries on it, make a discourse outline of the passage in the original language, summarize the point of each sub-section of the passage, and make those brief summaries my sermon points. Then I seek to summarize the point of the whole passage and make that the sermon's title. I am very concerned for my main points to be simply, plainly, and really the points the passage is making, so God's people are fed God's word, and not mine. Once I have come up with the sermon points, I write the sermon as an explanation of how the passage makes those points, often supporting the point with other scripture, sometimes illustrating its meaning, and always applying the point. I seek to write out every word of the sermon, but I avoid following the manuscript word for word when delivering the sermon, unless I simply cannot remember the point that needs to be made without reading a short portion of the sermon.

I am seeking to do some sermon preparation more than a week before a sermon's delivery. In the past I have spent parts of Tuesday through Thursday translating, reading commentaries, and outlining the passage, and Friday and Saturday writing the sermon. Jay Adams recommends outlining the passage 6 months ahead of time (!), and I am interested in (however feebly) heading in that direction.

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After you preach a sermon, how should the congregation's understanding have changed?

Each individual in the congregation should know what the sermon text means, and have at least one idea of how it applies to them. They should know that the passage's message is part of the gospel, and because of its message they should see that they must believe on Christ and renew their obedience to Him.

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Among well-known church leaders living today, which one(s) do you admire most and why?

No church leader is perfect, and we should be suspicious of anyone saying "I follow Apollos." I give far more of my attention to Christian authors and leaders who are no longer alive than to those alive today. That said, I admire Sinclair Ferguson for his sincere godliness and pastoral concern as a man, his careful research, biblical faithfulness, sound judgment, and clear presentation as a scholar and teacher, and his commitment to serving not merely the academy, but the church. I admire Richard Gaffin for the same reasons. Henry Krabbendam had a significant influence on my thinking in college for these reasons, as well. I appreciate R. C. Sproul for his work of broadly and influentially promoting biblical, Reformed Christianity in the face of Arminianism. I do not know leaders beyond the Reformed community well enough to say I strongly admire them, though I respect biblical faithfulness, Christian character and morality, good scholarship, etc., when I see it.

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Do you prefer to preach topical sermons, work through a book of the bible, or a mix of both?

I prefer to work through a book of the Bible, but am willing to preach topical sermons.

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What type of balance do you strike in your sermons between salvation as the free gift of God by grace through faith vs. the gravity of sin, and need for repentance?

I always preach both. We must know the gravity of our sin in order to know our need not only for repentance, but also for God's free grace. And we must receive God's free gift of grace by faith in order to repent of our sin. We need to avoid both antinomianism and legalism, and retain the perspective that the gospel truly is "good news."

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What should the order be in a sermon – first on sin and repentance and if the church body responds, then explain grace, or vice a versa?

From my upbringing in the CRC and the Heidelberg Catechism's order of law-grace-gratitude, I tend to present the gospel in that order. But, I do not let a concern for the hearer's existential experience during the sermon, or a charismatic interest in observing the Spirit's work in myself or the congregation, set the agenda for the content of the sermon. God's word sets the agenda, and for that reason, I follow the outline of the passage. If the passage speaks of grace before it speaks of sin and repentance, I follow the order of the passage. God has good reason for the order of topics in His word!

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Comment briefly on any of the following topics that you feel ought to be given special emphasis from the pulpit.

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Grace

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Sin

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Redemption

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Providence

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Good works

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Personal devotion

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News or political events or topics

Insofar as the first six items are part of the whole counsel of scripture, and especially of the gospel, they each should be emphasized. The last item should only be mentioned as an illustration or application of the passage. Hobby horses don't belong in the pulpit.

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Are there any issues (church, social, political, or whatever) that are of particular importance or interest to you?

If the concern of this question is to discover whether I would allow the ministry of the word of God to be subordinated to any church, social, or political agenda, the answer is no, I would not. I will oppose church politics of a partisan nature, and social and political agendas in the church. If the question is seeking to discover whether I would be willing for the church to encourage members in their function as salt and light in the world to help at an organization like a crisis pregnancy center that presents the gospel while providing practical help to unwed mothers, the answer is yes!

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Are there any ministries, programs, or activities that you consider to be imperative in the life of the congregation? Please indicate whether you are strongly in favor of, opposed to, or neutral towards programs aimed at the following groups.

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Youth – teen

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Youth – pre-teen

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Single adults

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Adults only

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Married Couples

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Women

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Men

I do not believe there are particular ministries, programs, or activities that are imperative in the church, beyond the work of the church in worship, mutual edification, and witness, and the

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particular work to which the pastor, elders, and deacons are called. I do believe many ministries, programs, and activities, including each mentioned above, are allowable in the church, and can serve the goals of worship, mutual edification, and witness. A church should be organized so that it utilizes the gifts of its members to carry out this work. The gifts, needs, and opportunities present differ from one congregation to another and from one year to the next, making it wise to have multiple committees, age-specific Bible study / fellowship groups, and midweek activities in one church, and no midweek activities in another.

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What weekday activities of the church do you believe are important or essential? What should these activities focus on? (prayer, teaching, fellowship, etc)

Again, this depends on the church. If a congregation had no midweek activities, I would encourage members to visit one another and would seek to start a prayer meeting and/or Bible study before starting other activities.

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What is your view on sermons recognizing Christmas, Easter, and/or cultural holidays such as Mother's Day?

Individual Christians and the church are not obligated by scripture to celebrate Christmas, Easter, or any other holiday, so I do not desire to encourage Christians to associate their Christianity too closely with our culture's holidays. But because scripture is relevant to all occasions, and sermons should meet people where they live, I'm willing occasionally on a Mother's Day to preach a biblically faithful sermon on honoring our mothers.

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What are the parents' responsibilities in educating their children? Please describe your views on home, Christian, and secular schools.

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The primary responsibility for educating a child lies on the shoulders of the parents, not the government, community, or school. But it is permissible for the work of educating one's children to be delegated, as is evidenced by the schooling of Moses, Esther, Daniel, and Paul, and even Paul's description of the law as a "schoolmaster." In that case, the parents remain responsible to ensure their children are brought up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

If parents are weak educators, or weak Christians, I prefer to see their children in a Christian school. If they are strong educators, I see homeschooling as a good option. If they are strong Christians, secular schools are not necessarily a bad choice.

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How would you deal with outspoken visitors or members in the church -- for example: those who argue for adult baptism to the congregation?

If they were promoting a doctrinal error, I would invite them to my house or office to discuss the issue, and especially, to study the issue in scripture with me, and would seek to understand their concern, and convince them of scripture's teaching. I would encourage them not to teach their error in the church.

If they were promoting good doctrine with bad manners, or promoting their own opinions where scripture is silent, I would seek to show them the harm this can bring on the church and on themselves, and encourage them to change.

In any event, I would want them to understand my concern was for their and the church's spiritual welfare, and that, in the case of a believer's baptism, they could hold their position and remain a member of the church.

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What would be your approach to the examination of potential new members? Would you take different approaches for

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children, teens, and adults?

A potential new member from any age group would need to have a credible profession of faith—as evidenced in a correct understanding of the gospel, a reliance on Christ alone for salvation, and a commitment to lead a Christian life—and would need to answer the 4 membership questions affirmatively. I would not allow a child that did not meet these requirements to become a member, nor would I permit such a child to take communion, because of 1 Cor. 11:27-29. I would seek to determine if children had requisite maturity to profess faith, would encourage teens to make a profession of faith as part of their maturing into a Christian adult, and would encourage adults to be baptized and join the church with their whole family if possible.

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At what age do you believe children should be admitted to the Lord's Table?

At whatever age they make a credible, and public, profession of faith. I would not expect a child younger than junior high age to be ready to take that step.

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What is your belief with regard to voting rights for members? Should there be an age restriction on voting privileges?

The way to decide a person's voting rights to examine them for public profession of faith. If a potential member is not mature enough to vote in congregational meetings, the person is not mature enough to make a credible profession of faith. If the person is mature enough to make a credible profession of faith, they should be allowed to vote in congregational meetings.

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What is your view of the use of email and the internet?

I work as a web developer to facilitate the ministries of Reformed churches and organizations. Just as the printing press and the recovery of the study of Greek and Hebrew during the Renaissance enabled the Bible to be translated into the common language and broadly distributed during the Reformation, so today computers and the internet can enable us to more efficiently conduct Christian ministry. It's better to adopt the best technology available and use it well than to be afraid of it and limit your ability to interact with believers and unbelievers alike. A church should have a website to fulfill the same outreach purposes a newspaper ad fulfilled 50 years ago. Prayer chains can be carried out more efficiently through email than by telephone. The OPC's adoption of ConstantContact.com's services for a denominational newsletter is a good idea.

But you have to use technology wisely. It is easy to waste time reading insignificant email or websites, so you have to learn to spend time reading and responding to only that which really matters. Interacting through a computer can never replace interaction in person, which is essential in the life and ministry of the church. The internet contains material that is morally corrupting, and while it involves fencing the law and is an imperfect solution, a church should install a content filtering or reporting service on its own internet connection for the moral, legal, and job security of its members and staff.

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What value and role in the church is there in lay counseling?

Scripture teaches that lay members should teach, instruct, encourage, exhort, and warn other members. The foundation and authority of this counsel must always be the word of God. This is valuable for raising believers to maturity (Eph. 6:4, Titus 2:3-4), mutual edification in the life (Prov. 27:9, Rom. 15:14, Heb. 5:12) and worship (Col. 3:16) of the church, and protecting people from becoming hardened in sin (2 Thess. 3:15, Heb. 3:13) or even to save them from the fire of Hell (Jude 23).

Scripture lays the responsibility for giving this counsel most prominently on the pastor and

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elders of the church as those who are publicly and officially recognized as being called to give it. For this reason a lay counselor should not be given a prominence equal to that of the elders within the church, and the lay counselor's counsel must be overseen by and in submission to the counsel of the elders. I am comfortable with members giving one another counsel informally as they take part in Christian fellowship. I am only comfortable with formal lay counseling if it is implemented as a way of helping a member work out the details of their receiving the counsel given by the elders. Formal lay counseling amounts to teaching in the church, so a female counselor should not counsel adult men in this way.

Formal counseling that seeks to apply psychological theories or other ideas not derived from scripture should be clearly distinguished from biblical counsel that purely ministers the word of God. Psychology, sociology, and other fields do provide helpful insight into resolving human problems, and we should freely utilize their common grace insights into God's general revelation. But because general revelation must always be interpreted through the eyeglasses of scripture, and fallible—and especially secular and pagan—human theories must always be critically compared with the truth of scripture, any Christian counselor who uses such common grace insights should tell the person they are counseling when they are drawing on wisdom gained from a source other than God's word. Purely secular psychological counseling and psychiatric medicine do not have a place in the church, but can be of limited use to Christians in some cases, outside the church. Budget counseling, English as a second language classes, and the like can be utilized as part of the church's mercy ministry and outreach, but should not be seen as the center of the work of the church, which is spiritual in nature.

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What does "equipping the saints" mean to you?

It means identifying members' gifts for ministry in the church, teaching them doctrine, encouraging their devotion to the Lord and commitment to serve Him individually, in their families, church, work, school, and community, giving them opportunities to serve in the church, and giving them help and training to carry out that service.

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Do you see a mandate for Sunday School, Sunday evening service, or other church functions?

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I only see a mandate for public worship on Sunday, and not for Sunday School, a Sunday evening service, or any other meeting. I believe the weight of scripture is in favor of a Sunday evening service, that Paul's example of teaching from house to house shows the wisdom of home Bible studies led by those in the church who are able to teach, and his preaching in the marketplace and the Areopagus gives warrant for many methods of evangelism. But these things are not mandated by Scripture.

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What is your preferred approach to music in worship? Comment on special music, psalmody, hymns, contemporary Christian music.

Col. 3:16 teaches that scripture ("the word of Christ") should fill our singing, and should do so "richly." Our greatest concern in evaluating the music we use in worship should be to be sure its content is richly biblical. This rules out using some hymns and contemporary Christian music, not because of style, but because of content.

We must implement the "elements" of worship listed in WCF 21.5. The style of worship music is a "circumstance" of worship and so should be "ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word." (WCF 1.6) Because Col. 3:16 says our singing should be filled with *all* of scripture, the choice between singing a Psalm or a hymn is a choice between two equally biblical (what have historically been called) "forms" of worship.

I have found that the hymns in the hymnals of conservative Reformed churches are generally more richly biblical in their content than are the worship songs derived from contemporary Christian music. For this reason I tend to prefer a traditional style of worship. Yet I do love many praise songs I have learned along the way, and am not opposed to using them if they are faithfully biblical.

Congregational singing should be the norm. On the precedent of the OT choirs are permissible; they were not merely a ceremony. I believe special instrumental or vocal solos are suitable for offertories and as an aid to carrying out an element of worship, but I am uncomfortable with considering them a special contribution to the service that is deserving of special honor.

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Members in the course of their lives can often have problems of various sorts. What would be your approach to ministering to members dealing with problems such as:

Death in the immediate family

Divorce or marriage problems

Teen problems – drugs

Serious illnesses

Out-of-wedlock pregnancies.

I would visit them, read scripture and pray with them, and seek to give them counsel and arrange for diaconal assistance as they had a need. I consider dealing with these things an integral part of a pastor's work.

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Some who attend our congregation are single unmarried adults or are couples who have no or few children – what would be your advice to them regarding either marriage or children?

If those who are single desire to marry, I would encourage them to take part in fellowship with other Christian singles, primarily for the purpose of mutual edification, but also unashamedly as

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a means of finding a spouse. If they do not desire to marry, I would not encourage them to marry, but would want to know whether they had a sinful reason for not desiring to marry.

Those with no or few children who are still able to have children should desire to have children, because children are a blessing from the Lord. (Psalms 127 and 128) But in terms of Luke 14:28, parents must "consider the cost"—they must have good reason to believe they can adequately provide for and raise the number of children they decide to have—before having another child. The view that "We'll have as many children as the Lord gives us" does not properly consider the cost.

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How much should you or the elders discuss confidential problems of members with wives?
With their children ?

Confidential problems should only be discussed on a "need to know" basis. If a wife or child does not need to know, they should not know about a member's confidential problem. This is what I practice with my wife, with her wise assent, and it relieves her of the difficulty of answering members' prying questions.

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What is your interpretation of the creation account provided in Genesis 1 (e.g., literal 6 day, framework, etc.)?

I believe Gen. 1 speaks of a literal 6 days, so I hold that view. I share the Framework view's concern that God could have also employed created instrumentalities such as rain (Gen. 2:5-6) to bring about some of the events of the creation week, and for that reason am unwilling to oppose another man's ordination merely on the basis of his holding to the Framework view.

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Why do you want to be a pastor? How did God call you to desire this task? [MIF 10.a] Se

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e MIF

Personal

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When and how did you come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ? [MDF Question 10.A]
See MIF.

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What are some of your favorite books both Christian and secular?

John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion.
O. Palmer Robertson, The Christ of the Covenants.
Louis Berkhof, Systematic Theology.
Francis Turretin, Institutes of Elenctic Theology.
Herman Bavinck, Reformed Dogmatics.
J. I. Packer, Knowing God.
B. B. Warfield, The Plan of Salvation.
John Murray, Redemption Accomplished and Applied.
Cornelius Van Til, Christian Apologetics.
Cornelius Van Til, The Defense of the Faith.
Cornelius Van Til, Systematic Theology.
Jochem Douma, The Ten Commandments.
Ken Sande, The Peacemaker.
Roland Bainton, Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther.
Betty Lee Skinner, Daws: A Man Who Trusted God.
C. S. Lewis, The Chronicles of Narnia.
Frederick Copleston, A History of Philosophy.
William Shakespeare, Hamlet.
Umberto Eco, The Name of the Rose.

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Which newspapers, periodicals, newsletters, and websites do you regularly read?

The New Horizons, the Westminster Theological Journal, the unofficial OPC email discussion list, eWeek.

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How do you spend your leisure time? If you have any hobbies, what are they?

Reading, playing guitar, walking, biking, jogging, camping.

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In your personal life and your public ministry, how do you balance ministry to believers and their children with ministry to those outside the church?

I'm not sure I understand the question. I don't seek to minister to those outside the church except through outreach.

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How do you balance your professional ministry with your private/family life?

My wife and I take part in the activities of the church, so there is not a great disconnect between

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my family and the church. I seek to take one day per week off from working for the church, and so far have not filled up the majority of my evenings with church activities.

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What is your position on fellowship with non-reformed churches in the community?

We should promote fellowship with Reformed churches in the community and in the presbytery first. But it is good to cooperate with other churches in running Christian schools, and to occasionally take the youth to broadly evangelical Christian festivals. Members should be free to attend conferences and camps hosted by non-reformed churches, but a better arrangement is to host a Reformed conference or camp and welcome Christians from other churches to attend.

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Do you have any interest in participating in organizations in the community like Rotary? Why or why not?

I tend to think civic clubs take the place of the church, and so would not be interested in becoming a member of one. It is good for a pastor to know and be known by the leaders and members of the community, so I would take part in neighborhood and school activities, and perhaps join a health club.

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Do you have any interest in participating in organizations like a local homeless shelter, the Salvation Army or a Crisis Pregnancy Center?

Depending on the gifts and talents within the congregation, it could be good to help a homeless shelter or crisis pregnancy center. Because the Salvation Army is arguably a church, I would

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want to learn more about them before committing our congregation's resources to their work.

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How frequently do you feel your compensation should be reviewed?

Yearly, by the session in its review of the budget during its annual planning meeting several months prior to the congregational meeting.

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Do you believe in "merit" increases in compensation? If so – what does "merit" mean?

No. I haven't heard of this distinction before between "merit" and "necessity" raises for pastors. Elders who rule well are worthy of double honor, and the worker is worthy of his wages, but it appears to me the minister's compensation should be for the purpose of rendering him "free from worldly care and employment" (FOG 22.9), not for the purpose of respecting his ability, performance, academic degree, or years of service.

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Do you believe in compensation increases "of necessity?" If so – what does "of necessity" mean?

Yes. As stated above, what is "necessary" is what is sufficient for the minister to be "free from worldly care and employment." For the purpose of ministering in the community and taking on the lifestyle of the members and of the community, the minister should be paid a salary similar to the average salary of the members and of the community. This should include regular "cost of living" increases.