

Hearing Voices

God speaks to a search committee

By Barbara Myers

You've heard it more than once: God comes to us at the most unexpected times. What I didn't know is that God sometimes comes with such force that it touches everyone in a room.

In my case, the "room" was a Christian education classroom; the "everyone" was members of a search committee; and the "unexpected time" was the second interview of a prospective pastor—a female pastor.

This committee has been meeting for over a year, and we thought we were clear on what type of pastor we wanted to call: He needed to have experience, be young and full of energy, love working with youth, be a superior preacher and counselor, and name evangelism as a priority.

We read profile after profile. We spent hours scrutinizing every line on the profile pages. We even visualized how that pastor would fit into our settled, comfortable congregation.

We met with the district executive who talked about a wonderful candidate that would be a good fit with our congregation. He even suggested that our congregation was one of the few in our district that would be open to a female pastor.

Still we weren't convinced, but we agreed to do a "courtesy interview." The interview did not go well. We asked superficial questions, we were not entirely honest, and the pastor sensed our reluctance. After exchanging pleasantries, we dismissed the candidate and wished her well.

Almost a year passed. We interviewed several other pastors—all male. One was even young and loved working with youth. We thought he was "the one." He turned us down.

Throughout this year as we struggled to find the "right" pastor, God was speaking softly in the background, not pushing but nudging us to rethink our pastoral wish list.

Memories began to kick in, and we talked more and more about our first candidate's gifts for ministry. Almost a year into the process God's voice became loud enough that members of the committee felt the strong nudge to re-interview the female pastor.

The night of the second interview arrived cloudless, starry, and brightly lit by a full moon—foreshadowing of things to come.

We had asked the pastor to prepare devotions to open our interview time together. She began with these words from the hymnal: *"What is this place where we are meeting? Only a house, the earth its floor, walls and a roof sheltering people, windows for light an open door. Yet it becomes a body that lives when we are gathered here, and know our God is near."*

There it was again—God's voice—this time a little louder and spoken so each of us in the room could hear.

God's voice continued. One by one members of the search committee shared their concerns:

- *Was she a feminist?* God's voice assured the questioner that being a female pastor did not necessarily mean being a loud female pastor.
- *Where she and her spouse willing to relocate and move into the parsonage?* God's voice answered in the affirmative.
- *Was she prepared to do evangelism?* God's voice suggested that evangelism was every member's call.
- *Was she open to having members with alternative lifestyles?* God's voice assured the interviewer that mere tolerance was unacceptable and that acceptance and hospitality went hand-in-hand.

The questions continued for more than an hour, and never once did God stop speaking.

We heard God's voice when the pastor shared her struggles as the parent of a child in turmoil. We saw God's presence in a committee member's tears as she sensed solidarity, oneness, and acceptance. We felt God's hand on our shoulders as he massaged our tensions of uncertainty away. We felt God's presence as a handshake turned into an embrace.

We experienced a joy and a peace that we had not felt in more than a year.

God's voice was so loud that there was no denying what we were being called to do.

We were being called to open our ears to God's voice; to open our eyes to the gifts that were in front of us; and to open our hearts to this pastor who was—and still is—a good fit for our congregation.

Should you engage in this process, I invite you to use our search committee's experience as a tool:

- Be honest about the real issues.
- Be available to new ideas.
- Be receptive to the concerns of others.
- Be brave enough to take a leap of faith.

And most of all, allow God's voice to be heard, and maybe—just maybe—God won't have to shout so loud.

Here are several ways this resource may be helpful in your search process:

- As a way of introducing the congregation to spiritual side of the search process
- As part of the orientation process for search committee members
- As a devotion for search committee meeting
- As an article of reassurance when the process is taking longer than the congregation expects
- As a vehicle for discussion when search committee members get discouraged
- As a guide when sharing the search committee's experiences with the congregation.