

Why AG Churches Shouldn't Hire Non-AG Lead Pastors

If an Assemblies of God congregation is looking to find its next lead/senior pastor, must it limit its search to credentialed AG ministers?

Hiring a lead or senior pastor is one of the most important decisions a congregation will make during the lifetime of that church. When an uncredentialed “friend of the house” is beloved or the pastoral search process becomes difficult, however, it is tempting to expand the search beyond the pool of credentialed Assemblies of God ministers. However, there are principled and pragmatic reasons for hiring only pastors* who hold AG credentials.

Principled Reasons

The decision-making process should always be guided by principles. In the case of hiring a pastor, AG congregations should consider the doctrine of ministry and the AG polity requirements of AG affiliation when they hire pastors.

Doctrine of ministry. Article 11 of our Statement of Fundamental Truths says:

A divinely called and scripturally ordained ministry has been provided by our Lord for the fourfold purpose of leading the Church in: (1) evangelization of the world (Mark 16:15–20), (2) worship of God (John 4:23,24), (3) building a body of saints being perfected in the image of His Son (Ephesians 4:11,16), and (4) meeting human need with ministries of love and compassion (Psalm 112:9; Galatians 2:10; 6:10; James 1:27).

In AG doctrine, pastoral ministry is the Lord’s provision for the Church, not merely a denominational institution. As Paul writes, “Christ himself gave ... pastors and teachers” (Ephesians 4:11).

The authority of pastoral ministry requires congregations to exercise due diligence when hiring a pastor. Paul warns Timothy, “Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands” (1 Timothy 5:22). And James reminds would-be ministers that “we who teach will be judged more strictly” (James 3:1).

Polity structure. Our doctrine of ministry explains why pastors should be credentialed, but it does not explain

why they should be credentialed by *the Assemblies of God*. Our Constitution does, however. Article XI, Section 1, Paragraph (a), sub-paragraph (6) says, in part:

Churches desiring to be affiliated with The General Council of the Assemblies of God shall meet the following requirements. They shall: ... Make provision for a pastor who is a credentialed minister in good standing with the General Council and a district council ...

Notice the verb: “shall,” not “may” or “can.” This verb indicates an obligation or requirement, not a recommendation. That obligation must be written in the church’s governing documents (e.g., constitution and bylaws) for it to affiliate with the General Council and its district council.**

In summary, if the Bible establishes the general rule that ministers should be “divinely called and scripturally ordained,” our Constitution provides a mutually agreed upon rule for recognizing that ministry. Because we are a cooperative fellowship, we voluntarily agree to abide by the requirements of our governing documents at the General Council, district, and congregational levels.

For these principled reasons, AG congregations should hire credentialed AG ministers as their pastors.

Pragmatic Reasons

There are pragmatic reasons for doing so, too, however. Here are four in particular:

1. *Vetting.* A district council or ministry network (the terms are interchangeable) vets candidates for credentialed ministry in a number of ways. Just to name a few, it asks about their conversion and call to ministry and tests their understanding of doctrine. It conducts a criminal background check and checks their divorce history (if necessary).

Once candidates have become credentialed ministers, the district vets them annually by asking them to review and renew their voluntary commitments as credentialed ministers.

One of many reasons that district councils are entrusted to vet applicants and credentialed ministers is because

* Throughout this article, “pastor” refers to lead or senior pastors only.

** Some district councils refer to themselves as a “ministry network.”

congregations may not have the resources necessary to vet candidates for pastoral ministry in such a manner.

2. **Accountability.** The vetting process builds accountability into ministerial credentialing. After all, AG leadership has the authority to discipline credentialed ministers in the event of moral failure, doctrinal error, or abuse of leadership — all of which are dangers for a congregation.

By contrast, the power-differential between pastors and boards often makes it difficult for boards to remove an errant but popular pastor. The authority of the district to do so ends up protecting churches against leaders who violate established standards.

3. **Authority.** A church that hires a pastor who doesn't have AG credentials is out of compliance with its own governing documents, not to mention those of the General Council and its district.

Furthermore, if a local congregation has changed its bylaws to remove the requirement that a pastor be a credentialed AG minister, it is out of compliance with the General Council.

Both scenarios can create problems for the church in at least two ways:

First, because a church that affiliates with the AG agrees to operate consistent with both the Constitution and Bylaws of The General Council and of its district. Under AG polity, The General Council's Constitution and Bylaws have greater authority on those matters it addresses

than those of a district, which in turn have greater authority than those of local congregations in the event of misalignment.

Second, we are called to be faithful stewards. A church's lack of compliance with its own governing documents or General Council and/or district governing documents may have devastating spiritual, financial or other implications.

4. **Risk of disaffiliation.** A majority of churches that disaffiliate from the Assemblies of God are out of compliance by being led by a pastor who does not hold AG credentials. Congregations are built up over generations by people committed to the AG and its mission. Often the first step of mission drift by a church with decades of commitment to *Our Church, Our Family* begins with selecting a pastor without AG credentials.

Conclusion

When searching for a new senior or lead pastor, an Assemblies of God church should hire a credentialed AG minister. In light of our doctrine of ministry and AG polity, it is the right thing to do. But it is also the best practice as we steward our congregations and resources for the next generation.

So how does a church know what credentialed ministers are available? In addition to conferring with your district office, check out the nationwide AG search website at Called.AG.org/Job-Postings.