CONNECTIONS DISCUSSION GUIDE

**For Search Committees**

Purpose: Help your committee identify and document your church's denominational, missional, and ministry connections. This clarity helps potential pastoral candidates understand your partnerships, support networks, and collaborative ministry approach.

Time Required: One 2-hour committee meeting

Materials Needed: Whiteboard, multiple colored markers, camera phone for documentation

**OPENING DISCUSSION (10 minutes)**

**Facilitator Note:** Start on time. Read this section aloud to frame the discussion, then move immediately to Section 1.

Why does this matter? Your connections reveal your church's values, priorities, and ministry DNA. Some pastors thrive in highly connected, collaborative churches. Others prefer more autonomy. Some bring strong denominational ties, while others focus on local partnerships. Before you can find the right pastor, you need to know what kind of connection ecosystem he will be stepping into.

**Facilitator Script:** "We have two hours to map our connections, identify patterns, and determine what this means for our pastoral search. I will keep us moving through each section. Let's begin."

**SECTION 1: CONNECTION MAPPING WITH ASSESSMENT (45 minutes)**

**Facilitator Note:** This is your longest section. Set a timer. At 35 minutes, announce "10 minutes left to finish mapping." Do not let this section go past 45 minutes.

**Whiteboard Activity: Create Your Connection Map**

Divide your whiteboard into three columns:

* **Denominational Connections** (associations, conventions, networks)
* **Missional Connections** (mission agencies, church plants, partnerships)
* **Ministry Connections** (local ministries, parachurch organizations, coalitions)

As a committee, brainstorm every connection your church has. Write each one on the whiteboard under the appropriate column. As you list each connection, immediately mark it with the ratings below.

**Facilitator Tips:**

* Assign one person to write on the board while others call out connections
* Keep the pace moving - if discussion starts about one connection, say "Let's capture it and discuss patterns later"
* If the group gets stuck, use the prompting questions below
* Aim for 15-20 total connections across all three columns (more is fine, but you need time to assess)

**Prompting Questions (use as needed):**

Denominational:

* What associations or conventions do we belong to?
* What networks or affinity groups are we part of?
* Do we send messengers to annual meetings?
* What denominational agencies do we partner with?

Missional:

* What missionaries do we support financially?
* What mission agencies do we work with?
* Have we planted or helped plant other churches?
* What international or local mission partnerships do we have?

Ministry:

* What local parachurch ministries do we partner with?
* What crisis pregnancy centers, food banks, or rescue missions do we support?
* What community coalitions or ministerial alliances are we part of?
* What Christian camps, conferences, or retreat centers do we use?
* What theological training institutions do we support?

**Rating Each Connection (do this as you go):**

Add symbols next to each connection as you list it:

**Health Rating:**

* ✓✓ = Strong and healthy
* ✓ = Active but could be stronger
* ? = Unclear or inconsistent
* X = Dormant or broken

**Engagement Level:**

* F = Formal (official partnership, covenant, agreement)
* I = Informal (relationship exists but no formal agreement)
* P = Financial only (we give money but limited other involvement)

**Strategic Fit:**

* S = Strategic (aligns closely with our mission and values)
* M = Moderate (helpful but not central to who we are)
* L = Legacy (we do it because we always have)

**Facilitator Example:** When someone says "We support the local pregnancy center," immediately ask "How would we rate that - health? engagement? strategic fit?" Get quick answers, mark it, and move on.

**At 35 minutes, Facilitator says:** "We have 10 minutes left in this section. Let's make sure we have captured all major connections. Are we missing anything significant?"

**At 45 minutes, Facilitator says:** "Time. Take a photo of the whiteboard for our records. Now let's step back and identify patterns."

**SECTION 2: PATTERN IDENTIFICATION (20 minutes)**

**Facilitator Note:** This section analyzes what you just created. Keep discussion focused on patterns, not individual connections. If someone wants to debate a specific partnership, say "Let's note that and come back to it if needed."

Step back from the whiteboard and discuss what you see:

**Denominational Pattern Questions:**

* How tied are we to denominational structures and programs?
* Do we see our association as family or just affiliation?
* How much influence does denominational leadership have here?
* Would we describe ourselves as loyalists, cooperators, or independents?

**Facilitator Tip:** Pick 2 of these 4 questions based on what you see on the board. If you have heavy denominational involvement, ask the first two. If you have light involvement, ask the last two.

**Missional Pattern Questions:**

* Do we focus more on local missions or international missions?
* Do we prefer direct relationships or agency partnerships?
* Are we more financial supporters or hands-on participants?
* Do we emphasize evangelism, mercy ministry, or both equally?

**Facilitator Tip:** Again, pick 2 of these 4 questions. Follow what you see on the board.

**Ministry Pattern Questions:**

* Do we collaborate well with other churches and ministries?
* Are we known in the community as cooperative or independent?
* Do we prefer long-term commitments or flexible partnerships?
* What role does parachurch ministry play in our church life?

**Facilitator Tip:** If you have many ministry connections, spend more time here. If few, spend less time.

**Quick Gap Check (if time allows):**

* Are there obvious connections missing that we wish we had?
* Are there too many connections for us to maintain well?

**At 20 minutes, Facilitator says:** "Good discussion. Now let's talk about what kind of pastor fits our connection style."

**SECTION 3: CONNECTION PHILOSOPHY AND PASTORAL FIT (25 minutes)**

**Facilitator Note:** This is where the discussion becomes practical for the search. Keep the committee focused on what matters for finding the right pastor.

Based on your mapping and patterns, discuss:

**What kind of pastor fits our connection style?**

Work through these questions as a committee:

* Do we need someone with strong denominational ties and relationships?
* Do we need someone who can build new mission partnerships?
* Do we need someone comfortable with our current connection level?
* Do we need someone who can help us refocus or expand our connections?

**Facilitator Tip:** Let people respond, but watch for agreement emerging. When you hear consensus, name it: "I'm hearing most of us say we need someone who..." This helps the group recognize when they have answered a question.

**What should we tell candidates about our connections?**

* What will they need to know upfront about our denominational involvement?
* What partnerships are non-negotiable or deeply valued?
* What connections are flexible or open to change?
* What past connection conflicts or transitions should they know about?

**Facilitator Tip:** The last question is sensitive. If someone mentions a conflict, acknowledge it and say "That's important for candidates to understand" and keep moving. Don't let the group relitigate old conflicts.

**Red flags to watch for:**

Read these aloud to the committee:

* Candidates whose denominational philosophy conflicts with ours
* Candidates who want to drastically change our connection approach without church agreement
* Our own lack of clarity about what level of connection we want
* Assuming a candidate will automatically embrace all our current partnerships

**At 25 minutes, Facilitator says:** "We need to capture what we've learned in writing. Let's create our connection summary."

**SECTION 4: RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS (20 minutes)**

**Facilitator Note:** You are creating a draft summary together. It doesn't have to be perfect - you can refine the language later. Focus on capturing the substance.

**Whiteboard Activity: Draft Your Connection Summary**

Erase part of your whiteboard or use a fresh section. Work together to draft these sections. One person should write while the group suggests language.

**Our Denominational Identity** (Write 2-3 sentences describing your denominational involvement and philosophy)

**Facilitator Tip:** Start with "We are..." and let the group finish the sentence. Then ask "What else do candidates need to know about our denominational ties?" Capture 2-3 key sentences.

Example: "We are active members of the XYZ Baptist Association and Southern Baptist Convention. We send messengers to annual meetings and financially support Cooperative Program missions. While we value our denominational ties, we maintain autonomy in local decision-making and partnerships."

**Our Missional Partnerships** (Write 2-3 sentences describing your mission focus and key partnerships)

**Facilitator Tip:** Ask "What's our mission focus - local, international, or both?" Then "What are our key partnerships?" Keep it to 2-3 sentences.

Example: "We support 8 missionaries through the International Mission Board and 3 North American church plants. Our congregation participates in annual mission trips to Central America. We emphasize both evangelism and compassionate ministry."

**Our Ministry Connections** (Write 2-3 sentences describing your local ministry partnerships)

**Facilitator Tip:** If you have many local connections, group them by category. "We partner with crisis ministries, educational ministries, and recovery ministries in our community."

Example: "We actively partner with the local crisis pregnancy center, food bank, and ministerial alliance. Our facilities host a Christian homeschool co-op and recovery ministry. We value collaborative ministry but maintain clear theological boundaries."

**What We're Looking For** (Write 2-3 sentences about connection expectations for your next pastor)

**Facilitator Tip:** This should flow from your Section 3 discussion. What did you say you needed in a pastor regarding connections?

Example: "Our next pastor should value denominational cooperation while respecting local church autonomy. He should have a heart for both local and international missions. Experience building collaborative ministry partnerships is important."

**At 15 minutes into this section, Facilitator says:** "Take photos of this summary. Now let's finalize our recommendations."

**Committee Recommendations:**

As a committee, vote or reach consensus on these questions:

**Regarding Current Connections:** ☐ Our connections are healthy and strategic - no changes needed ☐ We recommend strengthening certain partnerships during interim ☐ We recommend ending or reducing some connections during interim ☐ We recommend evaluating connections after new pastor arrives

**Regarding Future Connections:** ☐ We are content with our current connection level ☐ We need to pursue new denominational relationships ☐ We need to develop new missional partnerships ☐ We need better coordination of existing connections

**Regarding Pastor Search:** ☐ We are clear about what connection style fits our church ☐ We need to discuss this further before interviewing candidates ☐ We are open to different connection philosophies ☐ We need help defining what we are looking for in this area

**Facilitator Final Steps (5 minutes):**

"Great work. Here's what happens next:"

**Action Items:**

The facilitator will need to:

* Type up the connection summary from the whiteboard photos
* Polish the language for the church profile
* Submit recommendations to the appropriate church body
* Ensure this information is included in materials for pastoral candidates

**Committee members will need to:**

* Review the typed summary when the facilitator sends it
* Suggest any corrections or clarifications
* Approve final version for church profile

**Facilitator Closing:** "We now have clarity about our connections and what we need in a pastor regarding partnerships and collaboration. This will help us find a pastor whose connection philosophy fits our church. Thank you for your focused work today."

**FACILITATOR PREPARATION GUIDE**

**Before the Meeting:**

* Reserve a room with a large whiteboard
* Bring multiple colored markers
* Bring your phone to photograph the whiteboard
* Review the guide and mark which prompting questions you will use
* Set up your timer app

**Facilitator Mindset:**

Your job is to keep the meeting moving and productive. You are not trying to get everyone to agree on everything. You are trying to accurately describe where your church currently stands regarding connections.

**Time Management Strategies:**

* Start on time even if someone is late
* Set visible timers for each section
* Give 5-minute and 2-minute warnings for longer sections
* When discussion wanders, gently redirect: "That's important, but let's stay focused on connections"
* If a question sparks debate, say "Let's note different perspectives and keep moving"
* When you hear consensus, name it and move forward

**Managing Different Perspectives:**

Some committee members may lean heavily denominational while others prefer independence. Some may want more mission involvement while others feel stretched. This is normal. Your job is not to achieve unanimity but to accurately describe where your church currently stands.

**Handling Tangents:**

Common tangents and how to redirect:

* **Debating a specific partnership:** "Let's capture this concern and discuss it with church leadership after this meeting."
* **Telling long stories about mission trips:** "Great experience. Let's note that missions are important to us and keep mapping."
* **Arguing about past denominational conflicts:** "That's part of our story. Let's acknowledge it and stay focused on our current state."
* **Discussing budget implications:** "Financial questions should go to the finance committee. We're focusing on relationships today."

**What Success Looks Like:**

At the end of two hours, you should have:

* A comprehensive list of your church's denominational, missional, and ministry connections
* Clear assessment of each connection's health and strategic fit
* Identified patterns in how your church approaches partnerships
* Drafted language describing your connections for the church profile
* Clear understanding of what kind of pastor fits your connection ecosystem
* Specific recommendations for the church and search process

**Remember:** There is no single right way to approach church connections. Your goal is not to be more or less connected than other churches. Your goal is to be clear about who you are so you can find a pastor whose connection philosophy and experience fit your church's identity and calling.