

TIM OWENS



THE SEARCH COMMITTEE

A NOVEL

Sheep need a shepherd...
some more than others.



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The Search Committee: A Novel

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In memory of Nora, the matriarch

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When I was much younger and didn't think things through very well, one of my selfish prayers was to ask God for a full life, to experience as much as possible, both good and bad. Of course he obliged, and that is partly how I came up with this story and these characters. It's been in the making for a while.

As for the actual writing part, I had a lot of help in editing, feedback, and encouragement from some special friends before it was picked up by my agent and publisher. Abigail Nelson (my favorite Episcopalian), Russell and Karen Wilson (friends from way back), Rev. Mark Owens (my dad, a retired Southern Baptist minister), Jan Day (former director of Christian education at Summerville Presbyterian Church in Summerville, South Carolina), and a posse of Presbyterian ministers (Rev. Pete Jorgensen, Rev. Dr. Charles Hasty, Rev. Dr. Bryant Harris, Rev. Erin McGee, and Rev. Larry Duncan) all provided encouragement, even after reading some or all of what I'd written.

Only after receiving positive feedback from these friends did my wife, Ruth, who has an MA in English literature, decide it might be a worthwhile read and pick it up. She knows me better than anyone else does and knew what I was trying to say even

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when I didn't. Thanks, Ruthie. You look great in those pink rubber boots.

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Finally I would like to acknowledge the pastors who were kind enough to allow me to use their material for three of the sermons in this book. The sermon in chapter 14 was written by Rev. Erin McGee while she was associate minister at Summerville Presbyterian Church. The idea for the sermon in chapter 27 is from the dissertation of Rev. Dr. Bryant Harris of Mars Hill Presbyterian Church in Acworth, Georgia. The sermon in chapter 40 is based, in part, on a sermon with a similar theme delivered by the Rev. Dr. Charles Hasty while he was interim minister at Summerville Presbyterian Church.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Search committees are formed by churches in many Protestant denominations when a pastor leaves a church, typically to take a position at another church. The members of the search committee are intended to be representative of their congregation. This is the story of one such search committee.

CHAPTER 1

When a church is without a pastor, or has a vacancy in an associate pastor position, or after the effective date of the dissolution of the pastoral relationship, the congregation shall, with the guidance and permission of the committee on ministry, proceed to elect a pastor or associate pastor in the following manner. The session shall call a congregational meeting to elect a pastor nominating committee, which shall be representative of the whole congregation. This committee's duty shall be to nominate a minister to the congregation for election as pastor or associate pastor.

THE BOOK OF ORDER, PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (USA): G-14.0530-31

THE CHURCH VAN already had 187,000 miles on it. It was a white Ford Econoline, and Travis figured it was either a '77 or a '78 model because it looked like the van his cousin Jimmy used to drive. The inside, though, was not like Jimmy's at all. Jimmy's metal-flake brown van only had front seats, and the interior, ceiling included, was covered with burnt-orange shag carpeting. Plus, Jimmy had installed a porthole-type window in the shape of a heart on each side, and he had a little wooden cabinet on one side where he kept his cassettes. It was pretty cool.

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The church van, on the other hand, had three bench seats plus the two up front, and it smelled like old vinyl. The rubber flooring was sticky, almost like the floor in a movie theater but not quite as bad. Some of the blue seats were cracked and the foam rubber beneath the vinyl had been gouged. Crawling in, no one complained except for Dot, who mumbled something about the smell.

The reason for crawling into the old van for a road trip was that their preacher said he had been called to a church in Atlanta, so they had to go get another one. The word going around was he had finally landed the Big Job. They all understood and accepted his “calling” as a logical progression in an average preacher’s career.

He had been with them about seven years and was pretty good at keeping things on an even keel, like the time those charismatics came in and tried to stir things up. The church lost a few members during that period, but he kept them together by preaching for four Sundays in a row on Job. First he preached about how all of Job’s farmhands and animals got killed or were run off by the Chaldeans and Sabeans; the next Sunday, Job came down with the boils from head to foot and took to scraping himself with a piece of broken pottery; the third Sunday, Job started whining and his friends turned on him. Before God got him all straightened out on the fourth Sunday, the charismatics got bummed out and left.

Anyway, their preacher was gone now, and they had an interim minister the presbytery had sent over until they could find a new one. Rev. John Haynesworth, the interim

minister, was older than their former preacher, with gray hair and silver-rimmed glasses, and taller, without the paunch. He was a nice man and had gone to Davidson. But as a preacher, he often used words and made points most of the congregation didn't comprehend. It was like being in a doctor's office and he was explaining how to interpret an EKG—the guy seemed to know what he was talking about, so you nodded your head in agreement even though you didn't really understand. They hadn't had any new members join since Rev. Haynesworth had taken over the pulpit.

Travis recalled one Sunday when Rev. Haynesworth was preaching about Ecclesiastes, like how the guy who wrote it thought vanity was responsible for everything people did. By the end of the sermon Travis was so confused that he wasn't sure whether vanity was a good thing or not. The guy who wrote Ecclesiastes made some pretty good points, according to the preacher. In any case, the search committee felt some pressure to get somebody good in there and to be quick about it.

Another reason for the rush to get a new preacher was due to two of the young families in the church leaving to help start a new nondenominational church south of town on 301, joining up with some disaffected Methodists and a few Baptist families looking for a more “progressive” church. If *progressive* meant a church that looked a lot like a dollar store, then Travis figured they had reached their goal. The elders in Travis's church had begun to talk amongst themselves about the threat this new church posed to the membership roll.

It wasn't that two families made a big difference—they had 286 members on the roll—but it could be the beginning of something bigger.

On the other hand, the two families that left were always whining about something, so Travis was kind of glad to see them go. He just couldn't understand why they would want to leave one of the prettiest churches in the county. It was an old church with white clapboard siding, a black shingled roof, and a bell tower covered in cedar shakes. The 650-pound bell that had survived a fire in the original church building in 1879 was rung every Sunday morning by an usher at precisely 11:05 a.m., which coincided with the entry of the choir from the back of the choir loft. Inside the sanctuary, the ceiling was made of dark-stained tongue-and-groove boards that met white plastered walls. There was no stained glass, just tall windows with interior dark-stained shutters. Also, the door and window trim had hand-carved designs on the top corners from 1883, when the church was rebuilt. Travis often admired the craftsmanship that had gone into the building and felt a little pride in being part of such an old, established church. Somehow it gave him a sense of legitimacy, a sense of belonging.

Travis Booth was the youngest of the men on the committee. Bill was the oldest, and Travis was young enough to be Bill's son. Travis had grown up in the church, and people said that he and his wife, Jenny, represented the future of their congregation. Jenny interpreted this to mean they needed to start having babies, but Travis wasn't too sure about that.

He tried to be real active at church, and Jenny enjoyed the circles, small Bible-study groups comprised only of women in the church. Jenny was in circle number three. From what Travis could tell, they discussed a lot more than the Bible.

Travis worked as the assistant manager at the Food Lion in town. He thought it was a pretty good job for him, considering where he came from. In addition to working inside and getting a decent paycheck, he got to talk to everybody who came in, because his office was on a platform behind the service desk at the front of the store. His boss didn't mind him talking so much; said it was good for business. Most of his time involved hanging around up front, standing on the platform and looking out over the store, watching the customers and the stockers. Travis never ceased to be amazed at what was thrown away—good stuff. But rules were rules; putting those expiration dates on everything had caused more food to be thrown away than anything else he could think of.

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There were seven altogether on the committee to find a new minister: Travis Booth—representing the young married professional; Bill Duncan—retired from the electric co-op; Frankie Fulford—about seventy, retired from the post office, the leader, more or less; Matt Fischer—early thirties, an out-of-work PhD living at home with his dad; Dot Spivey—a middle-aged gossip machine and housewife; Joyce Lambertson—about sixty, moved down from New York, widowed, and working part-time at the county library;

and Susie Mayfield—a bookkeeper at the electric co-op, late thirties, divorced, and good-looking.

Bill had spent twenty-eight years in one of those jobs that seemed like a good deal to everybody in town. Steady paycheck, good benefits, company truck—there weren't too many of those jobs around. When Travis first met him at some kind of special dinner in the fellowship hall on a Wednesday night, Bill asked Travis what line of work he was in. Travis told him he was the assistant manager at the Food Lion but that he was taking some classes over at Tech to apply toward an engineering degree. Bill replied, "I wish I had made something out of my career like that." Then Travis proceeded to tell him all the details about the credit hours he could use for his degree and how hard the math was. Bill smiled a little and said, "That's good. That's what you have to do nowadays—you have to go after it."

Bill did the driving on the trips and seemed to enjoy it. He liked to point out things as the van drove by them. For example, the van would pass a Golden Corral steak house and Bill would say something like, "Golden Corral . . . I wonder if their hot-food bar is as big as Ryan's." Remarks like these would invariably stir up some conversation.

Following that particular comment, Dot chimed in. "My cousin Roger, over in Rocky Mount—he's a lawyer, you know—he says those hot-food bars get a lot of people sick with food poisoning."

Bill replied, "Is that a fact? I never heard tell of anybody getting sick from the hot-food bar at Ryan's. Which one is he

talking about?” He had Dot’s number, plus he had probably eaten at every buffet in the state east of I-95.

Dot looked perturbed. “I don’t know exactly which one, but it was over in Rocky Mount.” She shifted in her seat, obviously satisfied with her answer.

Nobody knew it at the time, but Bill had some serious heart problems. He had told Travis about it on one of the trips when everybody else was asleep. They were driving along in the dark, coming back from a church visit in North Wilkesboro. There was hardly any traffic on 421. Bill said his doctor had put him on a special diet, one of those no-cholesterol, no-fat, no-sugar, no-caffeine, no-nothing types of diets. Plus he couldn’t smoke anymore.

A few months back there had been an article in the *Raleigh News & Observer* about how people here in eastern North Carolina had a high rate of heart disease. Something about all the fatback they used in cooking. Travis once had some string beans that had been cooked without fatback; they were so bitter he almost threw up. And fried fatback—talk about something good. Travis wondered how many slices of fried fatback he had eaten in his life; had to be in the thousands.

Anyway, Bill had this heart thing weighing on his mind. He wasn’t worried so much about dying himself as he was about leaving behind his wife, Mary Helen. She really loved him, and he really loved her. They’d had one child together, a boy, Billy. He was killed years ago while riding his bicycle down the road to his cousin’s house. Billy was eight. Bill and Mary Helen took it real bad.

“Hey, Bill, look at that one,” Travis said, pointing to the portable sign in front of a church they were passing. It read, *Treat every day like it's Sunday*. It was a Methodist church sign.

“That’s a good one, but I believe the Baptist churches win the prize for having the best signs.”

They had seen some good signs along the way, like *If you really love Jesus, you won't be flirting with the devil* and *Give all your problems to God. He'll be up all night anyway*. And the best one so far, in Travis’s opinion: *Without the Bread of Life, we're toast*. Everyone had laughed when they saw that one.

Travis had a little blue wire-bound book with him to keep notes on the different preachers they were going to hear. He turned to the back few pages of it and started writing down all the sayings they had seen on church signs. Their church didn’t have a sign, but if one was ever put up in the future, he figured it would be good to have some sayings to draw on. You never know. He finished writing down the one they had just passed and closed his notebook.

“Hey, that sign had a different saying on the other side,” Bill said as he looked in the rearview mirror. Travis turned around to look, but they were going around a curve and he lost sight of it.

“What did it say?”

Bill chuckled. “It said that atheism is a nonprofit organization, and they spelled *profit* like a *prophet* in the Bible.”

Travis opened his notebook and wrote it down.

Dot spoke up. “I heard those people who bought the old dry cleaner’s are atheists.”

Travis was beginning to think that God had allowed the devil to travel with them in the form of Dot Spivey. She had made it known that she wanted to be on the committee because, in her words, she wanted to “make sure we got a good one.” Short and thick in the middle and about fifty years old, she spoke her mind without any regard for whether she might be offending someone and had one of those hairdos that was real short in the back and then stood up on top like a rooster’s comb. She wore a lot of makeup and primped all the time, adding more blush or lipstick while looking into a small compact she fished out of her oversize pocketbook. She revered anybody who had money and, conversely, didn’t think much of those who didn’t. Travis tried to be pleasant, but deep down, he was terrified of her.

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Today they were headed to Charlotte, where among the fifty or so Presbyterian churches there were about eight preachers who were looking to make a move. They hopped over to 74 from 133. It was four-lane now all the way since they finally worked on the stretch through Robeson County where all the Lumbee Indians lived.

By the time they got close, everybody needed to go to the bathroom, so Bill stopped at a BP in Matthews, a small town on the outskirts of Charlotte. He figured they wouldn’t be able to go at the church, not knowing their way around and all. After everybody got back in, the women began their primping, especially Dot, who was making a major exercise

out of applying her Mary Kay. She was moving her lips so much to spread her lipstick that Travis thought she was going to end up looking like Bozo the Clown. But it turned out alright.

Susie brushed her shoulder-length auburn hair. It didn't take much for her to get fixed up.

Joyce just patted her hair in the back and on the sides. She looked a lot like Rosalynn Carter but dressed more plainly and didn't wear any makeup at all.

Frankie held a compact mirror close to her face and grinned, looking for remains of a Hardee's biscuit between her teeth. Satisfied, she closed the compact and put it back in her purse. Despite her age, Frankie was probably in better shape than anyone else on the committee. Every time she came into the grocery store, Travis noticed she was wearing an exercise suit and tennis shoes. Travis had overheard her tell one of the cashiers that she tried to walk two miles every day.

Looking back at Matt, Travis noticed his hair was all poofed up in the back from where he had been sleeping, but Matt didn't even bother with it.

Travis opened his little notebook. The fella whose application had given him the appearance of being "their kind of man" was forty-seven, married, two kids—one in college, one in elementary school (a surprise?)—and was born in Florida (not a plus). He wanted to pastor a small-town church, like theirs, and he was affordable. He gave no signs of being a liberal and seemed to be strong on family values. On paper he could have passed for a Baptist. The church he

was in currently was in the suburbs of Charlotte in a modern-looking building. It was relatively small, similar to their own, so it wouldn't be a big change for this minister.

They drove into the church parking lot right at 10:50 a.m. They had a plan for entering the church without drawing attention. Churches generally didn't throw out the welcome mat for search committees taking a look at their preachers.

Their usual approach was for Frankie and Bill to go in together as an older couple. Dot and Joyce were also to go in together, looking like two friends keeping each other company. However, they made odd companions—Dot with her hairdo, tight dress, and big, dressy pocketbook next to Joyce with her baggy skirt, plain blouse, unfixed hair, and macramé handbag. Then there were Travis, Matt, and Susie. Matt and Susie were supposed to be a couple and Travis was supposed to be Susie's brother. Unfortunately, their plan was compromised this morning when two ushers came out the front door of the church and drew a bead on all of them piling out of the van.

“Shoot,” Travis muttered.

The word would be out now; nevertheless, they went in according to plan and sat in different pews. Travis looked through the bulletin to see what hymns they would be singing. Good. Some old ones. None of that snuggle-up-to-Jesus music with guitars and harmonizing. Today they would sing “Holy, Holy, Holy,” “A Mighty Fortress,” and for closing, “Immortal, Invisible.” What a lineup. Travis checked the sermon title to see if it complemented the power hymns. Oddly enough, it

didn't. Instead, it was "Blessed Are the Meek." Travis thought the preacher had missed an opportunity there.

Looking around at the congregation, he began to wonder how these people came to live in Charlotte. They were definitely city folk. He couldn't imagine growing up in a big city. Where would the kids play? He just couldn't fathom it. They dressed a little different, more sophisticated. No brown necks with white foreheads among the men, although it was only March, of course. None of the men were in short sleeves. Each had on a coat and tie. Travis and Bill did too, but they were doing something special. Back at home, Bill would have been in short sleeves and so would Travis. Matt . . . maybe not. Actually, there was one guy sitting by himself wearing a T-shirt. He had long hair. Travis figured you got that sort of thing in the city.

Behind the pulpit was a large stained-glass window that Travis soon figured out had symbols related to the Apostles' Creed. It was real nice. The inside of the church was all white except for the burgundy carpet down the main aisle and the burgundy cushions on the white pews. Susie elbowed Travis when she sat down and raised her eyebrows approvingly. The subject of pew cushions had come up a few times in their church but had been voted down by the session due to the cost.

Travis looked over his shoulder and noticed that Dot was red-faced with the giggles. She was blowing it. Oh well. He couldn't see Bill and Frankie. The organist started playing and the choir came in through a side door on the right.

They had on white robes. Then the preacher came in. He was wearing a white robe with a light-green stole. There was a lot of white in this church. The preacher was balding and had let his hair grow a little long in the back. He wore thick-rimmed glasses and had a moustache, all of which meant nothing to Travis. However, glancing over his shoulder, Travis noticed Dot's contorted face and realized this poor guy didn't have a chance. He preached a good sermon, although Travis couldn't remember a lot of what he said—it was about God's grace.

The other logistics issue they always had to deal with was how to communicate with the preacher following the service. They usually tried to go to lunch with him, but it was a challenge to get his attention without giving themselves away to the whole congregation. It had occurred to Travis that it was hard work trying to steal a preacher. There was no easy way to do it.

Travis finally saw Bill and Frankie. They got to the preacher first. Bill said something, and the preacher smiled and motioned him and Frankie to stand over to one side in the narthex. Travis, Susie, and Matt came along and stood beside them without saying anything, and then Dot and Joyce followed suit. After all their covert tactics, they now stood in the receiving line for the entire congregation. It was quite possibly one of the most awkward moments Travis had ever experienced in church. People exiting the church were whispering and gathering in groups at the foot of the steps and then looking back up at them.

Bill looked at Travis and asked, "You ready to make a run

for it?” Travis chuckled nervously, looking down the steps where everybody was standing around. He wished they had parked out back. The women were fidgeting with their skirts and pocketbooks and were pretending not to notice everybody staring at them. Matt had his back to everyone and was looking at some painting on the wall, his hands in his back pockets and his hair still poofed up in the back. Like Matt, the preacher didn't seem fazed at all. He was taking it all in stride.

When the last of the congregation had passed, the preacher just stuck his chin out, looked straight at Travis, and said with raised eyebrows, “Let's go eat.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

TIM OWENS grew up in eastern North Carolina and now lives in Summerville, South Carolina, with his wife, Ruth, and their four children. He is an environmental engineer, and in addition to writing, he enjoys working on his old Ford tractor at his farm near Ehrhardt, South Carolina. Once the backsliding son of a Southern Baptist preacher, Tim was led gently by his wife into the Presbyterian church, where he is now an elder. This is his first novel. Visit his website at www.timowensauthor.com.

