

Midland Evangelical Free Church

Associate Pastor Questionnaire – Ben Cooley

PERSONAL:

1. Please share the stories of your testimony and call to ministry.

My Journey to Christ: I was raised in a family of religiously committed, but relationally unsaved, church hoppers. We moved around a lot and by 6th grade I was at best confused; by 8th grade I was entirely disinterested in the Church. My parents had settled in a local church by then, and God began to work through the unrelentingly patient pursuit of the Youth Pastor. Todd spent countless hours investing in me: talking about what the Bible said was true, taking me to serve at a local homeless mission, and putting up with my immature attitude. Eventually I went to summer camp, and Todd led me to Christ officially shortly after at the age of 16.

My Calling to Youth Ministry: I went to Reformed Bible College after High School... I was still pretty new to my faith, and I was concerned that I would lose my spiritual trajectory if I went to public university. So I went at first to gain better underpinnings. I spent my second year there on the residence life staff, and then transferred to Central Michigan University in my 3rd year to major in theater management and vocal performance. It was the pain and emptiness I met in the student body of CMU that led me to a night that changed my life. I remember being on my knees (because I was cleaning up my roommate's drunken mess in our bathroom), and telling God that if He could use me to spare others from the kind of destructive cycle I saw around me, then I would gladly be His to use for the rest of my life. I returned to the Bible college to major in youth ministry at the semester break, and have been following that mission to the best of my ability ever since.

I met my best friend & future wife, Melissa, at RBC. We were married in 2001 & have loved every second, although we have weathered a lot of what people refer to as "life experience" since then. I graduated as a non-traditional student & w-a-i-t-e-d on God to prepare the right place for me to serve in youth ministry. That place turned out to be First Baptist Church of Spring Lake, MI where I served for 9 years. I've now had the privilege of serving in three church bodies: First Baptist for 9 years, Union Center for 5, and I'm currently into my 5th year at Springhill. Along the way God has allowed us to help shape and equip the spiritual walk of many students and families, and there has been much good fruit produced for His Kingdom.

2. What do your daily spiritual practices look like?

I pray each morning, afternoon, and evening. I read the Bible and do a couple of

devotional readings for myself (not as research), and seek God in worship every day; on teaching nights I also pray before and after those occasions. I honor, love, and stay spiritually and relationally close to my wife. I try to be generally active, involve myself in the ministries of the church at large, and act out of a servant's heart in my personal sphere and community. I also stay connected to fellow ministry peers and friends throughout my life for accountability and discernment purposes. I try to maintain some margins in my time for healthy rest too – but of course what that actually looks like is all being relearned now that small kids are part of the mix! Overall, I feel it's important for ministry personnel to have established healthy spiritual and physical rhythms because healthy growing ministries run on healthy growing ministers.

3. What hobbies and activities do you enjoy in your free time?

I like to get out in my workshop and build sawdust (woodworking), I like to play soccer, play around with graphic design, and my house is part of Red Sox Nation. But seriously, my wife and kids are the best thing in my life and I will readily drop any hobby to be with them.

4. What would you attempt if you knew you wouldn't fail?

Maybe pursue a master's in Biblical Counseling and create a respite/retreat/training center to help heal and re-equip ministry personnel from all levels that are broken, burning out, or just looking to refocus. God has placed a desire within me to be that safe space for people to heal and discern.

5. What pastors, books, and/or people have influenced your life and ministry?

I read a ton of youth ministry articles from places like YM360, Dare2Share, LeaderTreks, and CIY. I'm also part of several youth pastor networks on Facebook and one that meets physically in my area. Aside from the Bible, my college professors, and previous Senior Pastors, I have always liked CS Lewis, Sean McDowell, Jerry Bridges, Dallas Willard, Ken Ham, a good dose of apologetics. and many of the folks whose roots go back to early Youth Specialties and Simply Youth Ministry such as Walt Mueller at CPYU, Doug Fields at Simply Youth Ministry, and Kara Powell at FYI. I have a pretty wide spread as far as reading goes, and I typically have 5-6 books going at a time. Currently I'm in the middle of listening to The Kingdom of God lectures by Dallas Willard; and I have always been challenged by the way Leonard Sweet makes my thinking bend, so I picked up The Gospel According to Starbucks. I just finished a couple of books by Francis Chan, Hope of Nations by John S. Dickerson, and The Lazarus Life by Stephen W. Smith. I'm also slow walking through an IVP set on Ancient Christian Doctrine, and Martyn Lloyd-Jones keeps showing up everywhere I go right now, so I'll probably find something by him pretty soon.

6. What are the most valuable skills you bring to the church, and how did you develop them?

Humble Teamwork: Staying teachable under God, and complimentary to the team; what I know and what you know will eventually work together in concert if we rely on the Lord to direct us. I saw an amazing Senior Pastor crash and burn his ministry because he allowed a poor shift in his thinking to be elevated higher than any fellow ministry member or Bible passage. Teamwork under the authority of scripture is what displays the Body of Christ best, and I know when to teach and when to delegate.

Attentive Shepherding: If Jesus came to serve and love others, then our best image and likeness of God must also strive to lead the flock from the bottom upward. This requires patient dedication, commitment to personal care, willingness to get your hands dirty, and steadfastness to the right path forward. God has yielded leadership fruit in every congregation I've served in because I faithfully took the time to listen, compassionately engage, and walk the road with people.

Disciple Formation: I love teaching, it's by far my top spiritual gift. In youth and family ministry there are ample opportunities to formally teach - and certainly there should be. But I've come to realize that the major influence in a person's life is far less formal, less about a retreat or class they were in, and more about the quality time they spent with a mature believer. The leader must be present with the flock, accessible and consistent. Over 20 years in ministry has given me a great understanding of the spiritual building blocks necessary to generate a mature believer (such as prayer, Bible study, service, witnessing, mentoring, etc); but it's life lived applying these things that forms us as true disciples.

Mission Discernment: High ministry impact doesn't usually come from just doing more, it comes from intentionally focusing on the right things. Often the ordinary things that are already present in our lives are the very tools God intends for us to use. We must spread the Gospel, love the whole church, serve our community, and strive to deepen our own walk with the Lord. However these metrics are best accomplished in our context is where our efforts and treasure ought to be focused.

FYI, here are the results from several tests I have taken regarding Personality/Gifts:

Top 5 Gallups Strengths Finder are: Strategic, Learner, Responsibility, Relator, Achiever. ProScan descriptors: Take Charge, People, Patience, and Systems. Dimensions of Leadership Profile: Judgment, Integrity, Fortitude Team-building, Boldness and Performance. DISC Assessment = C, perfectionist pattern. MyersBriggs: INTJ. Spiritual Gifts in Order: Teacher, Discernment, Shepherd, Administration, Servant. Prominent Strengths: Faith, Patience, Humility, Work Ethic, Organization & Communication.

7. What are two weaknesses and two strengths you see in your life?

Weakness 1: The newness of our adopted family is a real game changer for the flexibility of our time and resources. For 22 years it was just Melissa and I, and we were able to jump into almost anything at a moments notice, together. We are learning how to navigate life as a bigger family now, but it's going to take us some time and an environment where there is a support base around us.

Strength 1: Adopting is definitely something God called us into, and so we have followed His leading in faith. It is simultaneously the biggest blessing and the hardest thing I have ever done. I would want my leadership to trust and follow God, even when it is difficult and involves risk.

Weakness 2: I'm 45 years old; that exciting young adult energy that's often a driving force in youth ministry has to come from the volunteers now. It's not that I'm not fun or engaging, I just have a gray beard and a minivan now. Maturity is a much different kind of cool factor – still powerful, but less flashy.

Strength 2: I've done this for more than 20 years (some of it in your city!), and I'm adept at inter-generational ministry within the church. Trends and culture are ever changing, but humanity is still hungering for God. In the world of teens and their families I know what works for long-haul spiritual development, how to make the right growth impressions while the cement is still wet, and how to assemble a team that passionately cares for every child.

8. Which sins do you struggle with, and what are you doing to address them?

Self-diagnosis is tough to do objectively on this, because I feel like I'm not really egregious in any particular area, yet guilty in every area too. The truth is I'm a sinner saved by grace, and the battle to die to myself is a daily fight. My pull toward perfectionism can lead me to the edge of workaholic-ism, and can sometimes skew my view of others efforts in a way that lacks compassion. I try to pay attention to Melissa in these matters, since God has blessed me with a very compassionate helpmate who will readily let me know if I'm losing focus on my godly priorities. I also try to make sure my schedule has clearly defined home-life blocks.

9. What measures do you have in place to ensure personal accountability?

I am 100% transparent with my wife, and she has access to everything I have access to aside from work-related matters that are professionally confidential. I also stay connected to fellow ministry peers and friends throughout my life for accountability and discernment purposes.

10. How do you cope with stress?

I talk with a trusted ministry peer or elder/pastor, talk through things with a fellow staff

member when it's appropriate, connect with God in prayer over it, and then usually find something to go work on with my hands for a little while.

11. How can we support you and your family as you adjust to this new role and location?

It will mean jumping back into a larger church role again, so there are some of those things to get up to speed on; every church has a living personality and process that will take us some time to fully understand. Midland is already familiar to us, so that's pretty well covered. Of course we'll need to make new small group connections and friends, and so will our kids... and we'll need to decide if continuing to home school is the right option for us.

THEOLOGICAL:

1. In a paragraph, how would you summarize your theological view?

I pretty well fall inside the Calvinist strain of the Baptist->Evangelical Free continuum, and my topical positions trend conservative. I'm very comfortable interacting with a lot of different denominations when it comes to community efforts, but I definitely believe in the inerrant authority of scripture, in believer's baptism and the Lord's Supper as the two ordinances of the church, and in the believer's responsibility to constantly work on what it means to be conformed to the image of Christ more and more every day.

2. Do you agree with the EFCA Statement of Faith? Please elaborate about any concerns or provide any comments.

No issues, I can readily support everything.

3. What is the gospel? How would you explain it to a student?

The Gospel is the good news that God has made a way for us to reconnect to Him in righteous standing through the payment of His Son Jesus Christ on the cross. Although I know other ways, and often it's a much more organic conversation, with various tweaks relevant to the particular student, I really like to use the organization of pints created by Dare2Share: God created us to be with Him. Our sins separate us from God. Sins can't be removed by doing good works. Paying the price for sin, Jesus died and rose again. Everyone who trusts in Him alone has eternal life. Life with Jesus starts now and lasts forever.

4. What is your stance on marriage, homosexuality (LGBTQ+), and transgenderism?

- **Marriage** - was designed by God to reflect the relationship between Himself and the Church. It is meant to be between one man, and one woman; and is not to be entered into lightly, but with full agape commitment. Divorce is permissible only in cases of

adultery and abandonment (I believe that abuse sometimes fits in this category).

- **Homosexuality** - is called out as a sin in several places in scripture and should not be part of the Christian life. While in itself it carries not greater weight than any other sin, the Bible is careful to highlight the deep consequences that come from any sexual deviance from God's intended design. Zooming out to the 30,000ft level, no Christian is sincere about following Jesus as Lord if they are continuing to lay plans to sin again later.

- **Transgenderism** – As with homosexuality, transgenderism seeks to subvert and reject the intention of the Creator. Doctrinally, it errs as soon as it places mankind's values above God's values. I am aware that tolerance is the cry of today's society, but it is not true love that leaves a person lost or stuck in a hole. The truth without grace is mean, and grace without truth is meaningless – we must strive to contend for freedom of the people we meet from the bondage and lies of sin.

5. What are some theological issues that are particularly relevant for Christian youth today?

- **The value of human life as image-bearers of God:** 1 in 14 teens have actually attempted to take their own life, and 65% of abortions come from women in their teens and 20's.

- **Biblical literacy:** 52% of American teens never read scripture on their own... out of 63% that claim to be Christians. How can they accurately believe and follow God if they aren't interacting with the Word that reveals who He is and what He wants?

- **Marriage & Family:** only 1 in 10 teens hold to a scriptural view of marriage, an institution designed by God to both reveal Himself and to safeguard the rearing of His people throughout the generations.

- **Jesus as the only Savior:** over 50% of Gen Z believes that all religions teach equally valid truths, which of course not only defies logic, but also undermines the value of Jesus atoning sacrifice for sin.

MINISTRY:

1. What aspects of this position are you most interested in?

I'm thrilled to see an emphasis being placed on "teaching and modeling Biblical truth in culturally relevant ways" through the "development of a discipleship strategy that integrates evangelism, Bible literacy, and spiritual formation" by pouring into the volunteer leaders and parents.

2. Which element of ministry stirs your heart and passion the most?

Pouring into and discipling the volunteer leaders and parents within an overall inter-generational context.

3. Please share or attach your philosophy of ministry.

- People above programs, we must provide enough reliable structure for a fruitful vine to grow, but keep in mind that the most beautiful programs are missing the mark if they aren't bearing fruit.
- The church is God's abiding rescue plan for the world; para-church ministries are definitely important, but the local church is primary.
- Following the Holy Spirit. We don't want to make plans and then ask God to bless them, we want to prayerfully tune in to His calling and find blessing under His leading.
- Discipleship Markers I look for: Know God through His Word, Love God by Striving to be With Him at all times. Live God's influence on the World around you. Tell God out loud with words to all the world.

4. How do you handle the administrative responsibilities associated with ministry?

Some are to be handled personally, and I make the appropriate time to ensure timeliness and reliability (planning, budget, recruiting and training, etc). Some things are easy to delegate to others involved (volunteers leading parts of youth ministry, supply shopping, printing/cutting copies, etc).

5. Please describe your leadership style and any managerial experience you have.

I'm a strategic achiever, a leader who treasures prayerful planning, group buy-in, and taking calculated risks toward changes from a place of overall consensus. There are very few ruffled feathers in my ministry past because I take seriously the fact that the work I'm doing is a stewardship of God's flock, not my fan club.

6. How have you implemented changes within the church(es) you've served at previously?

In most of them I have been responsible for creating the structure and building the program from nothing but a sparsely attended Sunday school class. In those cases I felt freer to move quicker, but I still wanted to take the time to find out what the church body valued and why. The first 6 months often involved a lot of evaluation and few big changes unless they were necessary. Along with any invested volunteers, everything was prayerfully put through a "vision window", which is to say that we can most clearly see our ministry calling within the boundaries of our Mission, Identity, Values, and Intentions. After several sessions of discussion we would discover together that some things were just draining us and yielding little fruit (easy to trim), some things were yielding fruit but needed fertilizer (focus more effort), and some were debatable but needed some fresh design. The process also helped uncover areas where we felt called but weren't really doing anything that hit that mark, so collaborative brainstorming and trials grew out of that.

7. How have you developed and led volunteers?

An important factor is providing clear on and off ramps for their commitment. A first time volunteer needs the chance to get their feet wet, and know they can re-up or leave after a certain time. I have never had many people decide to leave. I use social media, group training and planning sessions, sometimes I've held leaders retreats, I provide resources for continued growth and personal meetings to follow up with them on anything they might want or need. Obviously it depends on what your structure looks like, but delegating actual responsibilities is really key to establish group ownership as well.

8. Please describe how you have disciplined others.

Not everything in ministry is discipleship. Not everything we do or even everything we teach is discipleship, and attendance is no guarantee that discipleship has occurred. Discipleship is the process of multiplication of Christ-likeness through relationship, and discipleship takes place when mature believers shape newer believers into committed followers of Jesus Christ. I have met weekly in groups or as needed one-on-one; always involving prayer, sometimes using a book or prepared materials, sometimes just leaning in and paying attention to where the individual is at spiritually and helping them discover what they need to take their next step deeper into Christ-likeness. It's more about giving focused personal attention over time than any one strategy, model, or material.

9. What lessons have you learned from past congregations?

The ROCK (although not a congregation in the traditional sense) taught me how to love the individual while leading the corporate. Here is where I learned that people trump the program. First Baptist taught me that truth without love is mean, and love without truth is meaningless. Here is where I learned ministry balance is healthy and leadership diplomacy is effective. Union Center taught me how to love others as Jesus is still loving me; deeply, sincerely, and with so much grace. Here is where I learned to listen first for God in every situation, and to consider what is the most loving step to take. Springhill taught me that God's plan is infinitely more detailed than I could have ever imagined. I learned that sometimes God brings you through good or bad to shape you for connection to others whose lives He has also been working on.

10. When receiving criticism, how do you typically respond?

I try to hear and receive it as constructive, like everyone else, I am one of the irons being sharpened as much as doing the sharpening. I want to be doing my best work for the Lord in concert with His people, and if I've missed something professionally or

caused undue hurt then I would hope to be prayerfully and compassionately brought to deal with it.

11. Please describe a time when you had to resolve a conflict.

In the realm of youth and family ministry, I have had almost no conflict:

*Only 3 families that cited our program as one of the reasons they were leaving FBC, though they were all practically gone already and were looking for a scapegoat. I met with or phone called each parent and took as much time as they wanted talking through their issues, which each time essentially boiled down to them not wanting to be held accountable to the same guidelines as everyone else. In each case they were not going to change their minds anyway for reasons that were outside of the youth ministry, and I am still on good terms with all of the kids in question today, 10+ years later. *Only one volunteer couple at Union Center that vigorously disagreed with a necessary volunteer staffing re-alignment - shifting from small groups broken down by both grade and gender (14 groups), to by age group and gender (4 groups) – a decision made due to staffing shortages. No amount of reason or group consensus could persuade them, and ultimately they left our church and went to one across town that didn't even have small groups for youth.

12. Please describe any prior experience you have with pastoral counseling.

I currently have only life and ministry experience as my credentials and I completed an AACC unofficial course called Coffee Cup Counseling. I am interested in this field as a potential master's pursuit in the future though. I have met with people for all manner of things (special needs, school grades, disrespect at home, a mentally ill father who committed suicide by cop, difficulty in the home due to employment termination/potential and actual divorce/foster care trauma, etc), when it surpasses spiritual support and biblical guidance I have always sought out reputable counseling services in the area to entrust people to.

13. What are some key trends in youth and family culture today, and how do you plan to engage them in ministry?

- Young parents value self-expression and customization – they were raised to believe they can change the world and are looking for support (and often mentors) to help them do it. They appreciate faithful programmatic offerings, but consider regular attendance to be a relative term – often once a month or in-between their kid's sports seasons. I believe this is an issue that demands a 2 pronged response. First, the church was meant to be on the move, so we need to get better at going mobile and meeting them where they are going to be. Secondly, investing in mentorship relationships that

consistently point them toward Christ's Body as a top priority can help reground these families into storing up heavenly treasure instead of chasing after travel ball.

- Fatherlessness and blended families – these continue to be a major factor in teen development with nearly 25 million teens living apart from their biological father and a divorce rate hovering around 40%. We need to resource families with that fragility in mind, and build a bridge for them to acquire the skills they need for now as well as the future.
- The rise of AI – it isn't just the negative affects of screen time anymore, it's kids saying their best friend is Character.AI. Truly meaningful relationships require give and take, and their worth is built on the growth that is worked within us as we do the work of them. Meanwhile digital companions require nothing from us and are a constant source of affirmation, which is actually a deceitful trap. We must be prepared and assertive in promoting real life on life engagement, based on God's truth, perhaps through small groups, affinity groups, and other ways to keep showing up in families lives.

14. Describe your experience with youth missions trips and your view on local, national, and global youth mission trips.

I have taken groups to attend state-side mission trips run by other organizations, as well as planned out and co-led both mission trips and local outreach engagement efforts. Although I'm not particularly opposed, I have never attended or structured anything that has gone out of the country except for money or donations. I believe that local missions on a smaller but more frequent basis are our primary responsibility. When we take on the life of Christ in our community we can impact students through partnering with Young Life, or serve in a local food kitchen, or teach elementary kids how to read, or assist an unplanned pregnancy to choose life, or lend companionship dignity to assisted living tenants; these kinds of things magnify the name of Christ and offer a hand up to the often overlooked. I believe that support for global Gospelization is also our responsibility. Going on short-term mission trips can absolutely be a powerful growing experience and catalyst for spiritual direction in a young person's life (as well as working out some good in the world at large). If we have these opportunities, I believe we should responsibly utilize them when we get the chance and leave the rest up to God to use in His wisdom. I also think that a strong benefit to the Church worldwide is when we partner with one another.

15. What is your strategy for engaging and communicating with parents?

Some of my best conversations with parents have occurred on the edge of a soccer field, or helping them carry moving boxes. There is great power in harnessing the ordinary moments in life with the power of Gospel living, so show up where your sheep

are. In a more formal sense, there ought to be parent meetings where shared vision, buy-in, and direction are formed and owned by everyone. I like to offer resources and offer training and encouragement when appropriate. I disagree that parents should stay away from the youth ministry, but rather hold that they are meant to be the primary disciplers of their children and ought to be in the sphere of ministry that involves them. No silo ministry, inter-generational cooperation whenever possible. Print, website, social media for disbursing announcement information and advance calendars and the like.

16. What would you attempt in ministry if you knew you wouldn't fail?

I would try to get involved in helping to heal the hurting ministry people, the pastors and directors out there that are broken or on the edge of burnout. I have no concept of what that would actually look like other than time and space paired with listening guidance and time with God.

17. What legacy or impact do you hope to leave at the church where you're currently serving?

I don't care if they really remember me for very long, I want them to have fallen in love with God and seek after Him with their whole heart. And as my other previous locations bear out, several of them will continue on as my spiritual children in some capacity, and a few may even go into active ministry as a vocation. Any legacy I will have left beyond that will be the formation of the systemic tools they need to conduct an effective youth ministry, because they really had nothing in place when I got there.

18. Please attach/link a video of your teaching. We would prefer one in a teaching setting, rather than preaching.

To see Ben's Resume and listen to his preaching and teaching, see our resource page for his candidacy [HERE](#).