**Background and Reference Check Process**

A tremendous amount of time and effort is expended investigating the background of the candidate. This can be time-consuming and tedious work. However, to shortcut the process at this point is courting disaster.

Based on the “preacher’s” performance in the pulpit, the Committee moves forward to discover, only after the preacher has been on the field for six months, that he doesn’t pay his bills, or he doesn’t really care about people, or he is a dictator, or maybe he just does not fit the congregation. Such sloppy work among search committees is an affront to God and a betrayal of the congregation who has entrusted the Committee to find God’s man. The sad thing about all this is that in most cases this scenario could have been avoided if the Committee had been careful to look into the background of the candidate.

## Basic Questions

* There are at least three areas in the background of any candidate that should be carefully explored by the Search Committee and which must remain in the forefront when references are consulted:
* The Ministry Question – This relates to the candidate’s track record. Of course, if the candidate is a young minister, there will not be much history of ministry for the Committee to look at. However, as far as possible, the Committee should raise questions about the candidate’s ministry experience. Does he possess the ministry skills, experience and strengths that the next pastor should have to be effective (based on the profile that the Committee created)?

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* The Moral Question – This is a question that should not have to be asked. In an ideal world, all ministers would be godly, honest, decent, faithful and committed. The sad but real fact is that we do not live in an ideal world. In the real world, ministers are sometimes corrupt and immoral. Ministers have skeletons in their closets. It is the Search Committee’s responsibility, as far as possible, to look in the candidate’s closets. This is just another way of saying that the Committee must thoroughly investigate the candidate’s past in order to avoid the pitfall of calling a man who is not a man of God.
* The Mix Question – We all know that oil and water do not mix, and we should also be sophisticated enough to know that sometimes a pastor and a church do not mix. In other words, sometimes the fit is not comfortable. It is possible for a good pastor and a good church to get together and have a bad experience. In considering a new pastor, the Committee will want to consider the culture of the church. Can a city boy do well in a country church? Can a man who has nothing but big church experience be successful in a small church? Can a Northerner make it in a Southern congregation? The answer to all these questions is yes/no. There is no hard and fast formula to follow when it comes to making a decision of this import. Often, the decision is made as much on intuition as hard facts. The important thing is to realize that the Search Committee is looking for someone who will be a good fit with the people he is being called to lead.
* **Checking References**
* Thorough work in checking references can produce positive results and save tremendous travail that follows the calling of the wrong pastor. Typically, most resumes will include references. In the rare cases when references are not included, the Committee will want to secure references from any candidate who makes the short list.
* Checking the references is key to understanding the candidate and will produce either positive or negative results, depending on how well the Committee does its job. Granted, even when a Committee has done a thorough and effective work in checking references, there is no absolute guarantee of a healthy relationship between the new pastor and the congregation. However, the likelihood of the relationship succeeding is greatly enhanced by careful attention to detail in this matter.
* Since you have the candidates’ resumes in hand, it is a good idea to start with the references listed on the resume. Usually there are phone numbers and addresses included with those who are named as references. The Chairperson of the Search Committee will need to delegate among the committee members the task of contacting references. It is important to involve all members of the Search Committee, as far as possible, in this step in the process. It is equally important that the committee members all be on the same page. Therefore, the committee members will need to take as much time as needed to agree upon what questions are important to ask the references.[[1]](#footnote-1) It is a good idea to create a checklist that may be used by the committee members, assuring that common data about the candidates will be collected.

Some Search Committees choose to develop a letter to send to references.[[2]](#footnote-2) The references are cordially requested to respond in written form to the questions on the form and return the form in a stamped, selfaddressed envelope. Either of these methods can be used with good results. However, the phone conversation may provide opportunities to ask follow up questions or ask for amplification on specific responses. Of course, there can also be follow up on responses that are returned on the form. If more information is needed than what is provided in the written response, a phone call can help fill in the gaps. Another item for consideration in making this decision has to do with the simple fact that many people are reluctant to fill out a form, perhaps because of the time it takes or because they do not want their responses to be in written form.

Regardless of which approach the Committee decides upon, it is advised that the Committee go beyond the references listed on the resumes. Anybody can find three or four people who will give them a good reference. That is exactly why the Committee needs to expand its investigation beyond the references listed on the resume. There are several ways to accomplish that. One, when talking to the references listed on the resume, the committee member can ask the questions, “Can you provide me with the name (and phone number, if possible) of someone else who knows ‘\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_’?” Another way of expanding the investigation is to contact the Director of Missions in the association where the candidate is currently serving. As a general rule, the Committee is discouraged from contacting people in the candidate’s current church. However, it is perfectly permissible to contact members in churches where the candidate has served previously. These are usually listed on the resumes under “experience.” You may also want to contact the Director of Missions in the associations where the candidate has previously served. Realistically, the Committee should understand that there exists the possibility of getting negative feedback from a reference. After all, it is impossible to please everyone! However, after having contacted multiple references, the Committee should be aware if there are recurring patterns of destructive behavior or unhealthy issues that characterize the candidate’s ministry experiences.

1. See Appendix 10 for a sample form that may be used in consulting with references. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Appendix 11 for a sample cover letter. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)