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Guidelines for meeting and interviewing prospective ministers

These notes have been prepared to offer some help and ideas to diaconates and search teams who may be meeting a potential minister to consider exploring a call further. It is recognised that search teams will vary from those for whom this is a new experience to others who are regularly involved in some sort of recruitment process. This document may in places therefore cover detail which some find unnecessary, or suggest an approach that is more basic than the search group feels able to adopt.

However, those who are more experienced should remember two things:

- (i) It is important that the whole search team is able to engage in the process and offer a commendation to the church that is the conviction of every member. Care should therefore be taken not to operate at a speed or a technical level which leaves behind or disengages other members of the group.
- (ii) This is a process of discernment and not recruitment. While we can benefit from ideas and resources gained in the world of recruitment, there are also significant differences between the two. The task of the search team is to discern the Mind of Christ not filter out the best candidate. The group should also note that while principles of equality and fairness should prevail throughout the process, this is not a competitive interview situation, so there is not the need for the rigid application of procedures that is observed in other contexts.

Assisting the candidate

It is important to begin by recognising that the purpose of the meeting is not to trap the candidate or put them under undue pressure. Conversations will be far more fruitful if the candidate is rested, relaxed and put at their ease, this helps to create a context in which everyone concerned is able to give the best account of themselves as well as to express reservations and explore concerns.

You should also ensure that logistical arrangements have been thought through e.g.

Overnight Accommodation – if travelling some distance it may be better to meet the candidate after a night's sleep rather than a stressful four-hour drive. Make sure that the accommodation arrangements allow them space for their own thinking and reflection, and try to avoid using hospitality arrangements as an "Interview by stealth."

Environment – try to make the meeting space as comfortable as possible, place the candidate in a position where they can see everyone and try to avoid physical barriers (e.g. the search group sitting on one side of a table and the candidate sitting on the other). Make sure that drinks, snacks are available and that other physical needs are taken care of.

Worship – meetings should begin with prayer and perhaps an appropriate Scripture reading. This is an important reminder to everyone involved that we are seeking to discern God's will.

Expenses – you should meet all of the expenses involved in the candidate's attendance at the meeting. Current mileage rates are usually available from NWBA or BUGB.

Preparing for the Meeting

You have a relatively short time to reach some quite significant conclusions, so it is important that you seek to gain maximum benefit from your time together. This can be greatly assisted by spending time as a group preparing for the meeting. The following guidelines may help.

What to we need to find out?

It may seem a strange thing to say, but one of the greatest failings of an interview group can be that they do not determine what it is they need to find out before the interview. You may well have seen a candidate's profile and decided "*we would like to see this person!*" and this to a large degree is a perfectly valid reason for arranging to meet them. While a face to face meeting will go some way to helping determine whether or not someone is suitable, you can gain a great deal more by thinking through in advance what it is you need to find out from them. Sadly, candidates are often turned down not because of a particular failing, but because some people think they *might* have a particular failing. This is unfair both to the individual concerned and the rest of the church. It can be avoided by identifying in advance any concerns and questions search team members have, and considering how they can be addressed.

This can be done by asking some basic questions together:

What do we already know? – A candidate will have offered you a fair bit of information through their profile. It is important to take careful note of this and in particular try to avoid asking questions at interview that have already been answered on their personal profile; equally if they provide clear information that indicates they are unsuitable for your situation, it is unfair to invite them for interview and then turn them down on this basis.

What clarification is required? – It may be that some of the information given on the profile is unclear or raises questions for the group. One simple example might be a gap in a minister's work/education history – a straightforward question at interview can clarify matters. Equally it may be that something the minister has said raises cause for concern e.g. "I prefer modern worship" the group may wish to determine whether this is likely to mean a complete absence of traditional worship, or is simply a personal preference that does not exclude other possibilities.

What else do we need to know? – It is unlikely that a candidate will have precisely the same priorities as the interview group, so there may be information that is important to you that they have not given in their profile. Do not assume that an absence of information automatically means an absence of experience. For example it may be particularly important to you that the new minister is able to work well with the young people in the church, but their profile may not have given any indication of their experience in this respect. It is important to identify this as a topic to be explored at the interview stage.

What was in our original profile? – Again this may seem like an obvious point, but it is surprising how many search groups fail to take account of this in the early stages. Later disappointment can be avoided if you identify those parts of the profile that the minister has not given clear information about, and make these the subject of enquiry when you meet.

Often an interview group will plan and phrase questions in advance. If you do this, it is important that you select questions not simply because they seem a good question to ask, but with a clear sense of what it is you are seeking to find out through it. It can be helpful to assign an individual to ask further supplementary questions if the candidate's first answer does not provide the information you are looking for.

Another useful thing to recognise at this stage is the difference between what we will call *evidential* information, *conceptual* information and *perceptual* information. These may sound like rather technical and daunting terms, but perhaps make more sense when expressed practically. Imagine for example that you have a strong relationship with a local school, and it is therefore important that your next minister is able to sustain and develop this. You may therefore be looking at their profile for some information about their suitability in this respect.

"**I think schools work is very important**" is a *conceptual* statement. While it may be a useful indicator, it doesn't actually tell us anything about the candidate's ability or experience; it simply tells us what they think about a particular matter. Negative conceptual statements are quite useful for eliminating candidates (i.e. if they say "I don't think schools work is very important" it is pretty clear that they are not going to do any.) However, positive conceptual statements should not on their own be taken to indicate a candidate's suitability in a particular area.

“I am very good at schools work” is a *perceptual* statement. The individual clearly has some experience on which to base their conclusion, but one thing that we all have in common is that we can often be a poor judge of our own ability. It is important therefore to try and establish a more objective perspective. Negative perceptual statements can also be quite unreliable, there are many ministers who think that their ability in a particular area is poor or mediocre, yet whose congregations are delighted with their ability.

“I am a Governor at our local primary school and have taken assemblies there every week for the last two years” is an *evidential* statement. In this case it is not a matter of opinion but a statement of fact. We can also draw the conclusion that if the individual has been invited back every week for the last two years, they must be considered to have a fair measure of ability by those who are affected by their work.

You should try as much as possible to obtain evidential statements from the candidate. If a profile contains a large amount of perceptual and conceptual statements, this probably has more to do with the individual's communication style and should not be taken automatically as evidence of a lack of experience. However an interview group looking for an individual to work with a local school, should not accept a statement like *“I think schools work is important”* as evidence of suitability. A further element in the preparation process therefore is to identify that information which is *perceptual* or *conceptual* and to consider how this can be developed to something that is more evidence-based at interview stage.

An awareness of *evidential* information can also be useful when putting together questions for an interview. A question like “are you a good preacher?” is inviting a perceptual response so should be avoided. There are a number of ways that you can draw out evidential information:

Moving from concept to evidence Begin by asking a conceptual question e.g. “What do you think makes a good preacher?” allow the candidate to answer then supplement this with an evidential question e.g. “How have you sought to put this into practice in your own approach?”

Third party involvement – “Have you ever had any feedback from congregational members about your preaching?” A candidate who can tell you what other people think about them is likely to be offering a more objective viewpoint. You can also use this to explore negative perceptions, for example if a minister says that they are not a good pastor you can ask questions like “Have any of your congregation ever told you that?”; “Do you ever get any complaints?” This can help to flush out unfounded modesty.

Indicative evidence – It is obviously impossible to gather precise evidence for every aspect of ministry that you are concerned about, but by giving some thought to what are the “indicators” this can help develop some questions. For example if someone is regularly asked to speak at Spring Harvest and is always booked up for their free Sundays two years in advance, the signs are that they are a good preacher! So in this case you might develop questions like “Do you get much opportunity to preach outside of your local church?” etc.

Exploring adjectives – there are many words like “good”; “regular” etc. that can mean quite different things to different people. You may want a “good” preacher, but your standards and those of the candidate may be quite different. You can respond to a phrase like “I am good at visitation” by asking “what does that mean in practice?”; “what should a church expect of someone who is good at visitation?” etc. It is not just a matter of quality but also of style – someone with an academic background may well define “good” preaching as that which carefully analyses the text, presents various contextual arguments etc, someone with a more experiential spirituality may define “good” preaching as that which is quite expressive in style and is grounded in everyday life situations.

In summary, your preparation for the meeting should seek to identify:

- What do we already know and how does this eliminate or strengthen a candidate's suitability?**
- What is unclear and needs clarifying?**
- What additional information do we not yet know?**
- What are we actually looking for?**
- What information needs strengthening through evidential investigation?**

The final part of your preparation is to be clear about what you intend to do next. If you are seeking an initial informal meeting with a candidate and expect that the next step would be a further meeting with the search team in a more formal context, then you are likely to be more relaxed about the process than if your anticipated next stage is to invite the candidate to “preach with a view” before the whole church. Two things are particularly important:

- (i) Make sure the whole search team is clear about the next stages of the process; this can avoid misunderstanding and frustration later.
- (ii) Make sure the candidate is clear and content with the arrangements that you anticipate. This may well be affected by their own availability and geographic proximity. Very often the next stage will be decided by mutual consent depending on the candidate’s measure of enthusiasm or reservation. It may also be that you simply decide to leave things open ended and to decide the next stage after first meeting. Again this is quite acceptable; what matters is that everyone involved has a clear and consistent understanding of the situation.

It may be that through the course of the meeting, you have cause to change your future plans e.g. after intending to decide whether to invite an individual to preach with a view, there may be issues raised in the meeting that require you to meet again first. Again this is acceptable, but it is important:

To be clear as to the reasons that you have changed your intentions.

That there is purpose to a future meeting: If you are unable to make your mind up about a candidate, things are unlikely to change just by meeting again. If you arrange a future meeting with a wider group of individuals, or use the time in between to take soundings within the church on a particular matter that has become a concern, then there is clear process and thus purpose in a future gathering.

It may be that the candidate needs time to make some further enquiries, e.g. to check out local schools, to visit the area with spouse etc.

Meeting with the candidate

It is suggested that there are broadly four things that need to be considered at a first meeting:

Suitability – This is probably the most obvious element and will be about exploring their particular understanding and approach to ministry, and considering how this relates to the church’s own needs and aspirations.

Practical Issues – this might range from assessing housing needs, when the candidate is available to start etc. to finding out about local schools etc. Again you can go some way to making this easier by obtaining school prospectuses etc. in advance. However please make sure that you research all the options and do not try and make decisions on the candidate’s behalf. It may also be that some of these needs can be addressed by simply allowing the candidate time outside of the interview to make necessary enquiries. This should be borne in mind when planning the timetable for the visit. It is important that you give proper consideration to these matters and you should not proceed to inviting someone to preach at the church, unless you have a fairly strong belief that the practical matters can be addressed.

Rapport – You also need to give due attention not only to the factual information that is exchanged at the interview, but the spirit and feeling of the meeting. This has two important aspects; one is simply observing how you interact as a group and thus how you might work as a team together in future. There is also a spiritual dimension, and time should be taken to identify what you believe God is saying to you as a group about the candidate’s suitability.

Response – This is also the candidate’s first opportunity to meet you as a team, see the area and have some introduction to the life and ethos of the church. It is important to provide space to hear something of their reaction to meeting you and to let them ask questions about various matters.

Assessing the candidate

You will clearly gain some impression about the candidate by meeting them. However it is unfair to draw conclusions about them that are unfounded. It is important to test these through questioning and not be satisfied with making a decision based simply on your own perceptions.

Using the concepts of perceptual, conceptual and evidential information, outlined above, can also help you to analyse the candidate's answers to your questions:

Where a candidate continually expresses qualitative statements in a perceptual style (e.g. I am a good preacher, a strong pastor, an effective Bible teacher, an able leader and a clear thinker), this may say something about that particular individual's personality.

If a candidate continually offers conceptual information and does not support this with any evidence, it may raise questions about their ability to move from ideas to action.

If a candidate continually responds to requests for evidential information by offering conceptual, you may want to question their ability and/or experience in that particular area.

If a candidate offers evidential information that is quite general in nature, you may need to focus on their own particular role in a situation. (e.g. "my present church has a well structured outreach programme", might be because the church has a particularly able outreach co-ordinator or it may be because of the minister's ability in this respect.)

Remember that a pastoral ministry is shaped as much by the local church context as the gifts and skills of the individual. It is important to take this into account, for example a lack of experience with young people may be because the individual has been in an elderly congregation in an area where not many young people live. They may have strong abilities that they have not been able to exercise.

And Finally

The reflections above are offered to help you reach some objective conclusions on which to base further discussions. Those conclusions are not an end in themselves; it has already been said that this is not primarily a technical procedure but a matter of discerning God's will. It is vital therefore that as a search team you approach every stage of the process prayerfully and in a genuine spirit of seeking the Mind of Christ. Pray together, pray for one another, pray for the candidate, pray with the candidate and ask others to pray for you too!

Reaching a Conclusion

Once you have met a candidate, you will need to give some response reasonably quickly. It is important therefore at the planning stage that you identify time to meet together afterwards. If this cannot be done immediately after the meeting, ensure that a date and time has been set. Remember you are looking for God's choice of individual, so at this stage it is quite reasonable to conclude that a perfectly competent and able minister is simply not the right person for you. It is better to simply say this than to try and feedback "reasons" to the minister that are not really founded. Do not be afraid of saying "no" to someone; it is fairer to do this than to bring someone to meet the church who the search team feels deep-down is not suitable.