

## **REFERENCES ARE VITAL**

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Calling a minister without asking for references is foolish. There is no way in which deacons can truly get to know a person within the brief compass of an evening meeting. Similarly, there is a limit to what a church may learn from listening to a prospective minister preaching with a view. Of course, there is information provided on the minister's 'nomination profile' – but that is the candidate selling himself (forgive the apparent gender bias, but it gets wearisome to write he/she throughout), and even then the way in which the nomination form is constructed means that there is a degree of artificiality. In addition the regional minister will supply a commendation – but that is normally no longer than a paragraph. Surely what is needed is a set of references!

My own practice – viewed by some as totally unorthodox – is to request the names of three or four referees. I then send the referees an informal 'job' description and ask them to assess the candidate in the light of the job description. In addition I ask them a number of very specific questions, which would include the following.

- How secure is he in himself? Does he suffer from low self-esteem? How self-aware is he? How does he impact on others?
- To what extent is he 'a man of God'. How does he cope with the inevitable difficulties life throw up? How has he developed on his Christian pilgrimage?
- How well does he relate to people – both within and without the church?
- How much of a leader is he? What is his leadership style? To what extent is he an 'up front' person, or does he operate best in small groups or in one-to-one situations?
- How 'strong' a personality does he have? What kind of 'colour' is his personality? How 'charismatic' (in a non-Pentecostal sense) is he when he is leading a service or an event? Can he be boring? Is the 'party' always the better because he is there?
- Does he have the gifting of an evangelist as well as the heart of an evangelist? Indeed, what do you perceive to be his gifts?
- What kind of mind does he have? Does he have the ability to be analytical in his thinking? How stimulating a person is he?

If the candidate married, I ask how the couple function together as a pair. Although, of course, we are not considering calling the spouse, it would be helpful to know what kind of person she is. I also ask whether there are other issues of which we should be aware. Such questions may seem perhaps unduly probing, but we are concerned to find somebody who can really 'make a difference' to the life of our church. For us the issue is not 'Is he a nice guy?', but 'Does he have the necessary gifts and the passion to develop the church's mission and ministry' in this area or that?

Am I right to ask such questions? My understanding is that in the secular world a 'negative' reference is no longer acceptable. But if we are in the business of finding the right person for the right position, surely we can accept more than a bland reference?

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