

*Reference Check Questions*  
*Guidance Sheet for the Committee on Ministry (COM)*  
*& The Pastor Nominating Committee (PNC)*

***On what grounds do COMs or PNCs have the right to screen out candidates?***

Employment as a Presbyterian minister is not a right. Courts have established that the ministries of the Church of Jesus Christ belong to the Church and tasks are assigned to particular persons for the service of its members and the world. The Church must make such assignment responsibly.

Our Book of Order states:

*G-2.0103 “The call to ordered ministry in the Church is the act of the triune God. This call is evidenced by the movement of the Holy Spirit in the individual conscience, the approval of a community of God’s people, and the concurring judgment of a council of the Church.”*

*G-3.0306 “Each presbytery shall examine each teaching elder or candidate who seeks membership in it on his or her Christian faith and views in theology, the Sacraments, and the government of this church.”*

*G-2.0104 “Gifts and Qualifications a. To those called to exercise special functions in the church—deacons, ruling elders, and teaching elders— God gives suitable gifts for their various duties. In addition to possessing the necessary gifts and abilities, those who undertake particular ministries should be persons of strong faith, dedicated discipleship, and love of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Their manner of life should be a demonstration of the Christian gospel in the church and in the world. They must have the approval of God’s people and the concurring judgment of a council of the church.*

*b. Standards for ordained service reflect the church’s desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life (F-1.02). The council responsible for ordination and/or installation (G.2.0402; G- 2.0607; G-3.0306) shall examine each candidate’s calling, gifts, preparation, and suitability for the responsibilities of ordered ministry. The examination shall include, but not be limited to, a determination of the candidate’s ability and commitment to fulfill all requirements as expressed in the constitutional questions for ordination and installation (W- 4.4003). Councils shall be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates.”*

*G-2.0502 Presbytery and the Teaching Elder “Teaching elders have membership in the presbytery by action of the presbytery itself, and no pastoral relationship may be established, changed, or dissolved without the approval of the presbytery.”*

***What questions should a Pastor Nominating Committee ask of a reference?***

It is appropriate and important to ask questions related to the candidate’s skills and experience that relate to the position being filled. Such questions might be: “Tell me

about John Doe’s worship leadership” or “How does John deal with conflict?” It is important to ask references to respond only on the basis of first-hand knowledge. It is usually helpful to tell the reference a bit about the congregation, community, and position for which the candidate is being considered.

***Are there questions that are prohibited?***

Neither civil nor church law mandate prohibited questions. Many Presbyterian who serve on PNCs are familiar with secular employment practices where it is illegal to ask certain questions of a prospective employee. Because the ministries of the Church belong to the Church, the rules are different for search committees considering church professionals.

***Are there questions that a COM member or Executive Presbyter should ask?***

“Why is John Doe leaving his present position?”

“Are there any things about John that negatively affect his ability to do ministry?”

“Would you welcome John to serve in a similar position in your presbytery?”

***What do you do when a candidate is not able to sign the sexual misconduct statement (see below) in the affirmative?***

**{I certify below that no civil, criminal, ecclesiastical complaint has ever been sustained\* or is pending\* against me for sexual misconduct; and I have never resigned or been terminated from a position for reasons related to sexual misconduct.} (From the PIF)**

**I am able to make the above certification.**

**I offer, instead the following description of the complaint, termination, or the outcome of the situation with explanatory comments.]**

*For PNCs* – Turn this matter over to your EP or COM Chair and trust their advice.

*For EPs and COM Chairs* – Talk to the Executive Presbyter, the Stated Clerk, and/or the COM Chair in the presbyteries where the person has served. If the person has undergone counseling related to this issue, ask for a release and obtain a copy of a report from the counselor. Weigh all of this information carefully and prayerfully before responding to the PNC.

***What are secondary references?***

These are persons who are not listed by the candidate, but are suggested by others or contacted because they are thought to have knowledge of the candidate. Executive Presbyters, Stated Clerks, COM Chairs, and CPM Chairs do NOT fall into this category. They are automatically used as references because of their roles and no authorization is need from the candidate to consult with them.

***Under what circumstances is it appropriate for PNC members to contact secondary references?***

Secondary references should only be contacted when the candidate has given **written** permission. Under no circumstances should a PNC contact members of a pastor's present congregation without her or his permission to do so.

***When is the best time for reference checking to be done in a search process?***

It is wise for a PNC to do reference checks as soon as they know that the candidate is available, is interested in being considered and has made the PNC's list of top candidates.

It is very wise for a presbytery (EP, Stated Clerk, COM) to do reference checks before the candidate comes to the community for an interview. If difficulties are found, it is easier for everyone if that is known before this visit. Because of the time involved, it is beneficial if the PNC has narrowed its search to approximately 3 finalists before presbytery is asked to check references.

***When a presbytery check reveals negative information, what should COM or staff share with a PNC about a negative reference?***

If the information leads the COM Chair or staff to have serious doubts about the candidate's ability to do effective ministry in the particular calling church, they should share those concerns as a consultant, giving specific areas of ministry where they see potential difficulty.

If reliable information is of such a serious nature that the candidate should not be considered further, the PNC should be told that and the COM must determine whether they are willing to consider the candidate further.

***What are background checks?***

Background checks are assessments of a candidate's character and fitness for employment. They may include checks of past employment, education, credit, criminal, police, sexual abuse registry, and motor vehicle records.

***Should they be done on candidates for pastoral positions? On every minister transferring presbytery membership?***

Each presbytery must determine for itself the degree of risk management it wishes to achieve considering its needs and experience, counsel by legal and insurance advisors, and the message such procedures convey to candidates, the church, and the community. ***If this position will involve work with children***, PSNE will definitely do a background check on the person you call.

***What precautions should individual COM members or staff person take to minimize risk for references they give or information they fail to give?***

- Give references when you are able to think clearly and be focused. It is OK to ask the caller for an appointment to give the reference when you are at your best.
- Be sure of the identity and role of the caller and note it.
- Also make notes about the date, time, and content of your conversation.
- Find out a bit about the ministry context to which the candidate is seeking a call and evaluate what you know in light of that prospective context.
- Be sure you have reliable information. Do not share rumors or impressions that cannot be substantiated.
- Be sure you have specific information to back up negative reference.
- If there are serious concerns about a person, say so! You are responsible if you fail to share important information. Even if the receiving presbytery fails to do reference checks, the sending presbytery gives an affirmative reference by the action of transferring.

Approved by COM October 12, 2016